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THE GLADIATORS:

A Tale of Rome and Judæa.

BY

G. J. WHYTE MELVILLE,

AUTHOR OF 'DIGBY GRAND,' 'THE INTERPRETER,' 'HOLMBY HOUSE,'
'THE QUEEN'S MARIES,' ETC.

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THE GLADIATORS.

VOL. I.

EROS.

CHAPTER I.

THE IVORY GATE.



DAWK and stern, in their weird beauty, lower the sad brows of the Queen of Hell. Dear to her are the pomp and power, the shadowy vastness, and the terrible splendour of the nether world. Dear to her the pride of her unbending consort; and doubly dear the wide imperial sway, that rules the immortal destinies of souls. But dearer far than these,—dearer than flashing crown and fiery sceptre, and throne of blazing gold,—are the memories that glimmer bright as sunbeams athwart those vistas of gloomy grandeur, and seem to fan her weary spirit like a fresh breeze from the realms

of upper earth. She has not forgotten, she never can forget, the dewy flowers, the blooming fragrance of lavish Sicily, nor the sparkling sea, and the summer haze, and the golden harvests that wave and whisper in the garden and granary of the world.

Then a sad smile steals over the haughty face; the stern beauty softens in the gleam, and, for a while, the daughter of Ceres is a laughing girl once more.

So the Ivory Gate swings back, and gentle doves come forth on snowy wings, flying upwards through the gloom, to bear balm and consolation to the weary and the wounded and the lost. Now this was the dream the birds of Peace brought with them, to soothe the broken spirit of a sleeping slave.

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The old boar has turned to bay at last. Long and severe has been the chase, through many an echoing woodland, down many a sunny glade, by copse and dingle, rock and cave, through splashing stream, and deep, dank, quivering morass, the large rough hounds have tracked him, unmerring and pitiless, till they have set him up here, against the trunk of the old oak-tree, and he has turned—a true British denizen of the waste—

to sell his life dearly, and fight unconquered to the last.

His small eye glows like a burning coal; the stiff bristles are up along his huge black body, flecked with white froth that he churns and throws about him, as he offers those curved and ripping tusks, now to one, now to another of his crowding, baying, leaping focs.

“Have at him! Good dogs!” shouts the hunter, running in with a short, broad-bladed boar-spear in his hand. Breathless is he, and wearied with the long miles of tangled forests he has traversed; but his heart is glad within him, and his blood tingles with a strange wild thrill of triumph known only to the votaries of the chase.

Gelert is down, torn and mangled from flank to dewlap; *Luath* has the wild swine by the throat; and a foot of gleaming steel, driven home by a young, powerful arm, has entered behind the neck and pierces downwards to the very brisket. The shaft of the spear snaps short across, as the thick unwieldy body turns slowly over, and the bear shivers out his life on the smooth sward, soft and green as velvet, that exists nowhere but in Britain.

The dream changes. The boar has disappeared, and the woodland gives place to a fair and smiling

plain. Vast herds of shaggy red cattle are browsing contentedly, with their wide-horned heads to the breeze; flocks of sheep dot the green, undulating pastures, that stretch away towards the sea. A gull turns its white wing against the clear blue sky; there is a hum of insects in the air, mingled with the barking of dogs, the lowing of kine, the laughter of women, and other sounds of peace, abundance, and content. A child is playing round its mother's knee—a child with frank bold brow, and golden curls, and large blue, fearless eyes, sturdy of limb, quick of gesture, fond, imperious and wilful. The mother, a tall woman, with a beautiful but mournful face, is gazing stedfastly at the sea, and seems unconscious of her boy's caresses, who is fondling and kissing the white hand he holds in both his own. Her large shapely figure is draped in snowy robes that trail upon the ground, and massive ornaments of gold encircle arms and ankles. At intervals she looks fondly down upon the child; but ever her face resumes its wistful expression, as she fixes her eyes again upon the sea. There is nothing of actual sorrow in that stedfast gaze—still less of impatience, or anger, or discontent. Memory is the prevailing sentiment portrayed—memory, tender, absorbing,

irresistible, without a ray of hope, but without a shadow of self-reproach. There is a statue of Mnemosyne at one of the entrances to the Forum that carries on its marble brow the same crushing weight of thought; that wears on its delicate features, graven into the saddest of beauty by the Athenian's chisel, just such a weary and despondent look. Where can the British child have seen those tasteful spoils of Greece that deck her Imperial Mistress? And yet he thinks of that statue as he looks up in his mother's face.

But the fair tall woman shivers and draws her robe closer about her, and taking the child in her arms, nestles his head against her bosom and covers him over with her draperies, for the wind blows moist and chill, the summer air is white with driving mist, huge shapeless forms loom through the haze, and the busy sounds of life and laughter have subsided into the stillness of a vast and dreary plain.

The child and its mother have disappeared, but a tall, strong youth, just entering upon manhood, with the same blue eyes and fearless brow, is present in their stead. He is armed for the first time with the weapons of a warrior. He has seen blows struck in anger now, and fronted the Legions

as they advanced, and waged his fearless unskilful valour against the courage, and the tactics, and the discipline of Rome. So he is invested with sword, and helm, and target, and takes his place, not without boyish pride, amongst the young warriors who encircle the hallowed spot where the Druids celebrate their solemn and mysterious rites.

The mist comes thicker still, driving over the plain in waves of vapour, that impart a ghostly air of motion to the stones that tower erect around the mystic circle. Grey, moss-grown, and unhewn, hand of man seems never to have desecrated those mighty blocks of granite, standing there, changeless and awful, like types of eternity. Dim and indistinct are they as the worship they guard. Hard and stern as the pitiless faith of sacrifice, vengeance, and oblation, inculcated at their base. A wild low chant comes wailing on the breeze, and through the gathering mist a long line of white-robed priests winds slowly into the circle. Stern and gloomy are they of aspect, lofty of stature, and large of limb, with long grey beards and tresses waving in the wind. Each wears a crown of oak-leaves round his head; each grasps a wand covered with ivy in his hand. The youth cannot resist an exclamation of surprise. There is dese-

cration in his thought, there is profanity in his words. Louder and louder swells the chant. Closer and closer still contracts the circle. The white-robed priests are hemming him in to the very centre of the mystic ring, and see! the sacrificial knife is already bared and whetted, and flourished in the air by a long brawny arm. The young warrior strives to fly. Horror! his feet refuse to stir, his hands cleave powerless to his sides. He seems turning to stone. A vague fear paralyses him that he too will become one of those granite masses to stand there motionless during eternity. His heart stops beating within him, and the transformation seems about to be completed, when lo! a warlike peal of trumpets breaks the spell, and he shakes his spear aloft and leaps gladly from the earth, exulting in the sense of life and motion once more.

Again the dream changes. Frenzied priest and Druidical stone have vanished like the mist that encircled them. It is a beautiful balmy night in June. The woods are black and silver in the moonlight. Not a breath of air stirs the topmost twigs of the lofty elm cut clear and distinct against the sky. Not a ripple blurs the surface of the lake, spread out and gleaming like a sheet of

polished steel. The bittern calls at intervals from the adjacent marsh, and the nightingale carols in the copse. All is peaceful and beautiful, and suggestive of enjoyment or repose. Yet here, lying close amongst the foxglove and the fern, long lines of white-robed warriors are waiting but the signal for assault. And yonder, where the earth-rock rises dark and level against the sky, paces to and fro a high-crested sentinel, watching over the safety of the Eagles, with the calm and ceaseless vigilance of that discipline which has made the legionaries masters of the world.

Once more the trumpets peal ; the only sound to be heard in that array of tents, drawn up with such order and precision, behind the works, except the footfall of the Roman guard, firm and regular, as it relieves the previous watch. In a short space that duty will be performed ; and then, if ever, must the attack be made with any probability of success. Youth is impatient of delay—the young warrior's pulse beats audibly, and he feels the edge of his blade and the point of his short-handled javelin, with an intensity of longing that is absolutely painful. At length the word is passed from rank to rank. Like the crest of a sea-wave breaking into foam, rises that wavering line of

white, rolling its length out in the moonlight, as man after man springs erect at the touch of his comrade ; and then a roar of voices, a rush of feet, and the wave dashes up and breaks against the steady solid resistance of the embankment.

But discipline is not to be caught thus napping. Ere the echo of their trumpets has died out among the distant hills, the legionaries stand to their arms throughout the camp. Already the rampart gleams and bristles with shield and helmet, javelin, sword and spear. Already the Eagle is awake and defiant ; unruffled, indeed, in plumage, but with beak and talons bare and whetted for defence. The tall centurions marshal their men in line even and regular, as though about to defile by the throne of Cæsar, rather than to repel the attack of a wild barbarian foe. The tribunes, with their golden crests, take up their appointed posts in the four corners of the camp ; while the Prætor himself gives his orders calm and unmoved from the centre.

Over the roar of the swarming Britons, sounds the clear trumpet-note pealing out its directions, concise and intelligible as a living voice, and heard by the combatants far and wide, inspiring courage and confidence, and order in the confusion.

Brandishing their long swords, the white-clad warriors of Britain rush tumultuously to the attack.

Already, they have filled the ditch and scaled the earthwork; but once and again they recoil from the steady front and rigid discipline of the invader, while the short stabbing sword of the Roman soldier, covered as he is by his ample shield, does fearful execution at close quarters. But still fresh assailants pour in, and the camp is carried and overrun. The young warrior rushes exulting to and fro, and the enemy fall in heaps before him. Such moments are worth whole years of peaceful life. He has reached the Prætorium. He is close beneath the Eagles, and he leaps wildly at them to bring them off in triumph as trophies of his victory. But a grim centurion strikes him to the earth. Wounded, faint and bleeding, he is carried away by his comrades, the shaft of the Roman standard in his hand. They bear him to a war-chariot, they lash the wild galloping steeds, the roll of the wheels thunders in his ears as they dash tumultuously across the plain, and then * * * * the gentle mission is fulfilled, the doves fly down again to Proserpine, and the young, joyous, triumphant warrior of Britain wakes up a Roman slave.



CHAPTER II.

THE MARBLE PORCH.



T was the sound of a chariot, truly enough, that roused the dreamer from his slumbers; but how different the scene on which his drowsy eyes unclosed, to that which fancy had conjured up in the shadowy realms of sleep!

A beautiful portico, supported on slender columns of smooth white marble, protected him from the rays of the morning sun, already pouring down with the intensity of Italian heat. Garlands of leaves and flowers, cool and fresh in their contrast with the snowy surface of these dainty pillars, were wreathed around their stems, and twined amongst the delicate carving of their Corinthian capitals. Large stone vases, urn-shaped and massive, stood in long array at stated intervals, bearing the orange-tree, the myrtle, and other dark-green flowering shrubs, which formed a fair

perspective of retirement and repose. Shapely statues filled the niches in the wall, or stood out more prominently in the vacant spaces of the colonnade. Here cowered a marble Venus, in the shame-faced consciousness of unequalled beauty; there stood forth a bright Apollo, exulting in the perfection of godlike symmetry and grace. Rome could not finger the chisel like her instructress Greece, the mother of the Arts, but the hand that firmly grasps the sword need never want for anything skill produces, or genius creates, or gold can buy, so it is no marvel that the masterpieces and treasures of the nations she subdued found their way to the Imperial City, mistress of the world. Even where the sleeper lay reclined upon a couch of curiously-carved wood from the forests that clothe Mount Hymettus, an owl so beautifully chiselled that its very breast-plumage seemed to ruffle in the breeze, looked down upon him from a niche where it had been placed at a cost that might have bought a dozen such human chattels as himself; for it had been brought from Athens as the most successful effort of a sculptor, who had devoted it to the honour of Minerva in his zeal. Refinement, luxury, nay, profusion, reigned paramount even here outside the sumptuous

dwelling of a Roman lady ; and the very ground in her porch, over which she was borne, for she seldom touched it with her feet, was fresh swept and sanded as often as it had been disturbed by the tread of her litter-bearers, or the wheels of her chariot.

Many a time was this ceremony performed in the twenty-four hours ; for Valeria was a woman of noble rank, great possessions, and the highest fashion. Not a vanity of her sex, not a folly was there of her class, in which she scrupled to indulge ; and then, as now, ladies were prone to rush into extremes, and frivolity, when it took the garb of a female, assumed preposterous dimensions, and a thirst for amusement, incompatible with reason or self-control.

There is always a certain hush, and as it were, a pompous stillness about the houses of the great, even long after inferior mortals are astir in pursuit of their pleasure or their business. To-day was Valeria's birthday, and as such was duly observed by the hanging of garlands on the pillars of her porch ; but after the completion of this graceful ceremony, silence seemed to have sunk once more upon the household, and the slave whose dream we have recorded, coming into her gates with an

offering from his lord, and finding no domestics in the way, had sat him down to wait in the grateful shade, and overcome with heat, might have slept on till noon had he not been roused by the grinding chariot-wheels, which mingled so confusedly with his dream.

It was no plebeian vehicle that now rolled into the colonnade, driven at a furious pace, and stopping so abruptly as to create considerable confusion and insubordination amongst the noble animals that drew it. The car, mounted on two wheels, was constructed of a highly-polished wood, cut from the wild fig-tree, elaborately inlaid with ivory and gold ; the very spokes and felloes of the wheels were carved in patterns of vine-leaves and flowers, whilst the extremities of the pole, the axle, and the yoke, were wrought into exquisite representations of the wolf's head, an animal, from historical reasons, ever dear to the fancy of the Roman. There was but one person besides the driver in the carriage, and so light a draught might indeed command any rate of speed, when whirled along by four such horses as now plunged and reared, and bit each other's crests in the portico of Valeria's mansion. These were of a milky white, with dark muzzles, and a bluish

tinge under the coat, denoting its soft texture, and the Eastern origin of the animals. Somewhat thick of neck and shoulders, with semicircular jowl, it was the broad and tapering head, the small quivering ear, the wide red nostril, that demonstrated the purity of their blood, and argued extraordinary powers of speed and endurance; while their short, round backs, prominent muscles, flat legs and dainty feet, promised an amount of strength and activity only to be attained by the production of perfect symmetry.

These beautiful animals were harnessed four abreast—the inner pair, somewhat in the fashion of our modern curricie, being yoked to the pole, of which the very fastening-pins were steel overlaid with gold, whilst the outer horses, drawing only from a trace attached respectively on the inner side of each to the axle of the chariot, were free to wheel their quarters outwards in every direction, and kick to their heart's content—a liberty of which, in the present instance, they seemed well disposed to avail themselves.

The slave started to his feet as the nearest horse winced and swerved aside from his unexpected figure, snorting the while in mingled wantonness and fear. The axle grazed his tunic

while it passed, and the driver, irritated at his horse's unsteadiness, or perhaps in the mere insolence of a great man's favourite, struck at him heavily with his whip as he went by. The Briton's blood boiled at the indignity; but his sinewy arm was up like lightning to parry the blow, and as the lash curled round his wrist, he drew the weapon quickly from the driver's hand, and would have returned the insult with interest, had he not been deterred from his purpose by the youthful effeminate appearance of the aggressor.

"I cannot strike a girl!" exclaimed the slave, contemptuously, throwing the whip at the same time into the floor of the chariot, where it lit at the feet of the other occupant, a sumptuously-dressed nobleman, who enjoyed the discomfiture of his charioteer with the loud frank glee of a master jeering a dependant.

"Well said, my hero!" laughed the patrician; adding in good-humoured though haughty tones, "Not that I would give much for the chance of man or woman in a grasp like yours. By Jupiter! you've got the arms and shoulders of Antæus! Who owns you, my good fellow? and what do you here?"

“Nay, I would strike him again to some purpose if I were on the ground with him,” interrupted the charioteer, a handsome, petulant youth of some sixteen summers, whose long flowing curls and rich scarlet mantle denoted a pampered and favourite slave. “Gently, Scipio! So-ho, Jugurtha! The horses will fret for an hour now they have been scared by his ugly face.”

“Better let him alone, Automedon!” observed his master, again shaking his sides at the obvious discomfiture portrayed on the flushed face of his favourite. “Through your life keep clear of a man when he shuts his mouth like that, as you would of an ox with a wisp of hay on his horn. You silly boy! why he would swallow such a slender frame as yours at a gulp; and nobody but a fool ever strikes at a man unless he knows he can reach him, ay, and punish him too, without hurting his own knuckles in return! But what do you here, good fellow?” he repeated, addressing himself once more to the slave, who stood erect, scanning his questioner with a fearless, though respectful eye.

“My master is your friend,” was the outspoken answer. “You supped with him only the night before last. But a man need not be in the household of Licinius, nor have spent his best years at

Rome, to know the face of Julius Placidus, the Tribune."

A smile of gratified vanity stole over the patrician's countenance while he listened; a smile that had the effect of imparting to its lineaments an expression at once mocking, crafty, and malicious. In repose, and such was its usual condition, the face was almost handsome, perfect in its regularity, and of a fixed, sedate composure which bordered on vacuity, but when disturbed, as it sometimes, though rarely, was, by a passing emotion, the smile that passed over it like a lurid gleam, became truly diabolical.

The slave was right. Amongst all the notorious personages who crowded and jostled each other in the streets of Rome at that stormy period, none was better known, none more courted, flattered, honoured, hated, and mistrusted than the occupant of the gilded chariot. It was no time for men to wear their hearts in their hands—it was no time to make an additional enemy, or to lose a possible friend. Since the death of Tiberius, emperor had succeeded emperor with alarming rapidity. Nero had indeed died by his own hand, to avoid the just retribution of unexampled vices and crimes; but the poisoned mushroom

had carried off his predecessor, and the old man who succeeded him fell by the weapons of the very guards he had enlisted to protect his gray head from violence. Since then another suicide had indued Vitellius with the purple; but the throne of the Cæsars was fast becoming synonymous with a scaffold, and the sword of Damocles quivered more menacingly, and on a slenderer hair than ever, over the diadem.

When great political convulsions agitate a State, already seething with general vice and luxury, the moral scum seems, by a law of nature, to float invariably to the surface—the characters most destitute of principle, the readiest to obey the instincts of self-aggrandizement and expediency, achieve a kind of spurious fame, a doubtful and temporary success. Under the rule of Nero, perhaps, there was but one path to Court favour, and that lay in the disgraceful attempt to vie with this Emperor's brutalities and crimes. The palace of Cæsar was then indeed a sink of foul iniquity and utter degradation. The sycophant who could most readily reduce himself to the level of a beast, in gross sensuality, while he boasted a demon's refinement of cruelty, and morbid depravity of heart, became the first favourite for the time with his

imperial master. To be fat, slothful, weak, gluttonous, and effeminate, while the brow was crowned with roses, and the brain was drenched with wine, and the hands were steeped in blood—this it was to be a friend and counsellor of Cæsar. Men waited and wondered in stupefied awe when they marked the monster reeling from a debauch to some fresh feast of horrors, some ingenious exhibition of the complicated tortures that may be inflicted on a human being, some devilish experiment of all the body can bear, ere the soul takes wing from its ghastly, mutilated tenement, and this not on one, but a thousand victims. They waited and wondered what the gods were about, that Divine vengeance should slumber through such provocations as these.

But retribution overtook him at last. The heart which a slaughtered mother's spectre could not soften, which remorse for a pregnant wife's fate, kicked to death by her brutal lord, failed to wring, quailed at the approach of a few exasperated soldiers; and the tyrant who had so often smiled to see blood flow like water in the amphitheatre, died by his own hand—died as he had lived, a coward and a murderer to the last.

Since then, the Court was a sphere in which

any bold unscrupulous man might be pretty sure of attaining success. The present emperor was a goodhumoured glutton, one whose faculties, originally vigorous, had been warped and deadened by excess, just as his body had become bloated, his eye dimmed, his strength palsied, and his courage destroyed by the same course. The scheming statesman, the pliant courtier, the successful soldier had but one passion now, one only object for the exercise of his energies, both of mind and body—to eat enormously, to drink to excess, to study every art by which fresh appetite, could be stimulated, when gorged to repletion—and then—to eat and drink again.

With such a patron, any man who united to a tendency for the pleasures of the table, a strong brain, a cool head, and an aptitude for business might be sure of considerable influence. The Emperor thoroughly appreciated one who would take trouble off his hands, while at the same time he encouraged his master, by precept and example, in his swinish propensities. It was no slight service to Vitellius, to rise from a debauch and give those necessary orders in an unforeseen emergency which Cæsar's sodden brain was powerless to originate or to understand.

Ere Placidus had been a month about the Court, he had insinuated himself thoroughly into the good graces of the Emperor.

This man's had been a strange and stirring history. Born of patrician rank, he had used his family influence to advance him in the military service, and already, whilst still in the flower of youth, had attained the grade of Tribune in Vespasian's army, then occupying Judæa under that distinguished general. Although no man yielded so willingly, or gave himself up so entirely to the indolent enjoyments of Asiatic life, Placidus possessed many of the qualities which are esteemed essential to the character of a soldier. Personal bravery, or we should rather say, insensibility to danger, was one of his peculiar advantages. Perhaps this is a quality inseparable from such an organization as his, in which, while the system seems to contain a wealth of energy and vitality, the nerves are extremely callous to irritation, and completely under control. The Tribune never came out in more favourable colours than when every one about him was in a state of alarm and confusion. On one occasion, at the siege of Jotapata, where the Jews were defending themselves with the desperate energy of their race,

Placidus won golden opinions from Vespasian by the cool dexterity with which he saved from destruction a whole company of soldiers and their centurion, under the very eye of his general.

A manipule, or, in the military language of to-day, a wing of the cohort led by Placidus was advancing to the attack, and the first centurion, with the company under his command, was already beneath the wall, bristling as it was with defenders, who hurled down on their assailants darts, javelins, huge stones, every description of weapon or missile, including molten lead and boiling oil. Under cover of a moveable pent-house, which protected them, the head of the column had advanced their battering-ram to the very wall, and were swinging the huge engine back, by the ropes and pulleys which governed it, for an increased impulse of destruction, when the Jews, who had been watching their opportunity, succeeded in balancing an enormous mass of granite immediately above the pent-house and the materials of offence, animate and inanimate, which it contained. A Jewish warrior clad in shining armour had taken a lever in his hand, and was in the act of applying that instrument to the impending tottering mass ; in another instant

it must have crashed down upon their heads, and buried the whole band beneath its weight. At his appointed station by the Eagle, the Tribune was watching the movements of his men with his usual air of sleepy, indolent approval. And even in this critical moment his eye never brightened, his colour never deepened a shade. The voice was calm, low, and perfectly modulated in which he bade the trumpeter at his right hand sound the recall; nor, though its business-like rapidity could scarce have been exceeded by the most practised archer, was the movement the least hurried with which he snatched the bow from a dead Parthian auxiliary at his feet and fitted an arrow to its string. In the twinkling of an eye, while the granite vibrated on the very parapet, that arrow was quivering between the joints of the warrior's harness who held the lever, and he had fallen with his head over the wall in the throes of death. Before another of the defenders could take his place the assaulting party had retired, bringing along with them, in their cool and rigid discipline, the battering ram and wooden covering which protected it, while the Tribune quietly observed, as he replaced the bow into the fallen Parthian's hand, "A company saved

is a hundred men gained. A dead barbarian is exactly worth my tallest centurion, and the smartest troop I have in the maniples!"

Vespasian was not the man to forget such an instance of cool promptitude, and Julius Placidus was marked out for promotion from that day forth.

But with its courage, the Tribune possessed the cunning of the tiger, not without something also of that fierce animal's outward beauty, and much of its watchful, pitiless, and untiring nature. A brave soldier should have considered it a degradation, under any circumstances, to play a double part; but with Placidus every step was esteemed honourable so long as it was on the ascent. The successful winner had no scruple in deceiving all about him at Rome, by the eagerness with which he assumed the character of a mere man of pleasure, while he lost no opportunity the while, of ingratiating himself with the many desperate spirits who were to be found in the imperial city, ready and willing to assist in any enterprise which should tend to anarchy and confusion. While he rushed into every extravagance and pleasure of that luxurious Court—while he vied with Cæsar himself in his profusion, and surpassed him in his orgies—he suffered no symptoms to escape him of

a higher ambition than that of excellence in trifling,—of deeper projects than those which affected the wine-cup, the pageant, and the passing follies of the hour. Yet all the while, within that dainty reveller's brain, schemes were forming and thoughts burning that should have withered the very roses on his brow.

It might have been the strain of Greek blood which filtered through his veins, that tempered his Roman courage and endurance, with the pliancy, essential to conspiracy and intrigue. A strain that was apparent in his sculptured regularity of features, and general symmetry of form. His character has already been compared to the tiger's, and his movements had all the pliant ease and stealthy freedom of that graceful animal. His stature was little above the average of his countrymen, but his frame was cast in that mould of exact proportion which promises the extreme of strength combined with agility and endurance. Had he been caught like Milo, he would have writhed himself out of the trap, with the sinuous persistency of a snake. There was something snake-like too in his small glittering eye, and the clear smoothness of his skin. With all its brightness no woman worthy of the name but would have

winned with womanly instincts of aversion and repugnance from his glance. With all its beauty no child would have looked up frankly and confidently in his face. Men turned, indeed, to scan him approvingly as he passed; but the brave owned no sympathy with that smooth set brow, that crafty and malicious smile, while the timid or the superstitious shuddered and shrank away, averting their own gaze from what they felt to be the influence of the evil eye.

And yet in his snowy tunic bleached to dazzling white, in his collar of linked gold, his jewelled belt, his embroidered sandals, and the ample folds of his deep violet mantle, nearly approaching purple, Julius Placidus was no unworthy representative of his time and his order, no mean specimen of the wealth, and foppery, and extravagance of Rome.

Such was the man who now stood up in his gilded chariot at Valeria's door, masking with his usual expression of careless indolence, the real impatience he felt for tidings of its mistress.



CHAPTER III.

HERMES.

IT was customary with the more refined aristocracy of Rome, during the first century of the Empire, to pay great respect to Mercury, the god of invention and intrigue. Not that the qualities generally attributed to that power were calculated to inspire admiration or esteem, but simply because he had acquired a fortuitous popularity at a period when the graceful Pantheism of the nation was regulated by general opinion, and when a deity went in and out of fashion, like a dress.

At Valeria's porch, in common with many other great houses, stood an exquisite statue of the god, representing him as a youth, of athletic and symmetrical proportions, poised on a winged foot in the act of running, with the broad-leaf hat on his head, and the snake-turned rod in his hand. The

countenance of the statue was expressive of intellect and vivacity, while the form was wrought into the highest ideal of activity and strength. It was placed on a square pedestal of marble immediately opposite the door; and behind this pedestal, the slave retired in some confusion when a train of maidens appeared from within, to answer the summons of Julius Placidus in his chariot.

The Tribune did not think it necessary to alight, but producing from the bosom of his tunic a jewelled casket, leaned one hand on the shoulder of Automedon, while with the other he proffered his gift to a damsel who seemed the chief among her fellows, and whose manners partook largely of the flippancy of the waiting-maid.

“Commend me to your mistress,” said Placidus, at the same time throwing a gold chain round her neck on her own account, and bending carelessly down to take a receipt for the same, in the shape of a caress; “bid her every good omen from the most faithful of her servants, and ask her at what hour I may hope to be received on this her birthday, which the trifle you carry to her from me will prove I have not forgotten.”

The waiting-maid tried hard to raise a blush, but with all her efforts the rich Southern colour would

not deepen on her cheek ; so she thought better of it, and looked him full in the face with her bold black eyes, while she replied : “ You have forgotten surely, my lord, that this is the feast of Isis, and no lady, that *is* a lady, at least here in Rome, can have leisure to-day for anything but the sacred mysteries of the goddess.”

Placidus laughed outright ; and it was strange how his laugh scared those who watched it. Automedon fairly turned pale, and even the waiting-maid seemed disconcerted for a moment.

“ I have *heard* of these mysteries,” said he, “ my pretty Myrrhina, and who has not ? The Roman ladies keep them somewhat jealously to themselves ; and by all accounts it is well for *our* sex that they do so. Nevertheless, there are yet some hours of sunlight to pass before the chaste rites of Egypt can possibly begin. Will not Valeria see me in the interval ? ”

A *very* quick ear might have detected the least possible tremor in the Tribune’s voice as he spoke the last sentence ; it was not lost upon Myrrhina, for she showed all the white teeth in her large well-formed mouth, while she enumerated with immense volubility those different pursuits which filled up the day of a fashionable Roman lady.

“Impossible!” burst out the damsel. “She has not a moment to spare from now till sunset. There’s her dinner,* and her fencing-lesson, and her bath, and her dressing, and the sculptor coming for her hand, and the painter for her face, and the new Greek sandals to be fitted to her feet. Then she has sent for Philogemon, the augur, to cast her horoscope, and for Galanthis, who is cleverer than ever Locusta was, and has twice the practice, to prepare a philtre. Maybe it is for *you*, my lord,” added the girl roguishly. “I hear the ladies are all using them just now.”

The evil smile crossed the Tribune’s face once more; perhaps he too had been indebted to the potions of Galanthis, for purposes of love or hate, and he did not care to be reminded of them.

“Nay,” said he meaningly, “there is no need for *that*. Valeria can do more with one glance of her bright eyes, than all the potions and poisons of Galanthis put together. Say, Myrrhina—you are in my interest—does she look more favourably of late?”

“How can I tell, my lord?” answered the girl, with an arch expression of amusement and defi-

* The dinner, or *prandium* of Rome, was the first meal in the day.

ance in her face. "My mistress is but a woman after all, and they say women are more easily mastered by the strong hand, than lured by the honeyed lip. She is not to be won by a smooth tongue and a beardless face, I know, for I heard her say so to Paris myself, in the very spot where we are now standing. Juno! but the player slunk away somewhat crest-fallen, I can tell you, when she called him 'a mere girl in her brother's clothes' at the best. No; the man who wins *my* mistress will be a *man* all over, I'll answer for it! So far, she is like the rest of us, for that matter."

And Myrrhina sighed, thinking, it may be, of some sunburnt youth the while, whose rough but not unwelcome wooing had assailed her in her early girlhood, ere she came to Rome; far away yonder amongst the blushing vines, in the bright Campanian hills.

"Say you so?" observed the Tribune, obviously flattered by the implied compliment; for he was proud in his secret heart of his bodily strength. "Nay, there was a fellow standing here when I drove up, who would make an easy conquest of you, Myrrhina, if, like your Sabine grandams, you must be borne off to be wed, on your lover's shoulders. By the body of Hercules!

he would tuck you up under his arm as easily as you carry that casket, which you seem so afraid to let out of your hand. Ay, there he is! lurking behind Hermes. Stand forth, my good fellow! What! you are not afraid of Automedon, are you, and the crack of that young reprobate's whip?"

While he spoke, the slave stepped forward from his lurking place behind the statue, where the quick eye of Placidus had detected him, and presented to Myrrhina with a respectful gesture the offering of his lord to her mistress—a filigree basket of frosted silver, filled with a few choice fruits and flowers—

"From Caius Licinius, greeting," said he, "in honour of Valeria's natal day. The flowers are scarce yet dry from the spray that brawling Anio flings upon its banks; the fruits were glowing in yesterday's sun, on the brightest slopes of Tiber. My master offers the freshest and fairest of his fruits and flowers to his kinswoman, who is fresher and fairer than them all."

He delivered his message, which he had obviously learned by rote, in sufficiently pure and fluent Latin, scarcely tinged with the accent of a barbarian, and bowing low as he placed the basket in Myrrhina's hand, drew himself up to his noble

height, and looked proudly, almost defiantly, at the Tribune.

The girl started and turned pale—it seemed as if the statue of Hermes had descended from its pedestal to do her homage. He stood there, that glorious specimen of manhood, in his majestic strength and symmetry, in the glow of his youth, and health, and beauty, like an impersonation of the god. Myrrhina, in common with many of her sex, was easily fascinated by external advantages, and she laughed nervously, while she accepted with shaking hands the handsome slave's offering to his master's kinswoman. "Will you not enter?" said she, the colour mantling once more, and this time without an effort, in her burning cheeks. "It is not the custom to depart from Valeria's house without breaking bread and drinking wine."

But the slave excused himself, abruptly, almost rudely, losing, be sure, by his refusal, none of the ground he had already gained in Myrrhina's good graces. It chafed him to remain even at the porch. The atmosphere of luxury that pervaded it, seemed to weigh upon his senses, and oppress his breath. Moreover, the insult he had sustained from Automedon, yet rankled in his heart. How he wished the boy-charioteer was nearer his match

in size and strength. He would have hurled him from the chariot where he stood, turning his curls so insolently round his dainty fingers—hurled him to earth beyond his horses' heads, and taught him the strength of a Briton's arm and the squeeze of a Briton's gripe. "Ay! and his master after him!" thought the slave, for already he experienced towards Placidus that unaccountable instinct of aversion which seems to warn men of a future foe, and which, to give him his due, the Tribune was not unused to awaken in a brave and honest breast.

Placidus, however, scanned him once more, as he strode away, with the critical gaze of a judge of human animals. It was this man's peculiarity to look on all he met as possible tools, that might come into use for various purposes at a future and indefinite time. If he observed more than usual courage in a soldier, superior acuteness in a freed-man, nay, even uncommon beauty in a woman, he bethought himself that although he might have no immediate use for these qualities, occasions often arose on which he could turn them to his profit, and he noted, and made sure of, their amount accordingly. In the present instance, although somewhat surprised that he had never before

remarked the slave's stalwart proportions in the household of Licinius, whose affection for the Briton had excused him from all menial offices, and consequent contact with visitors, he determined not to lose sight of one so formed by nature to excel in the gymnasium, or the amphitheatre, while there crept into his heart a cruel cold-blooded feeling of satisfaction at the possibility of witnessing so muscular and shapely a figure in the contortions of a mortal struggle, or the throes of a painful death.

Besides, there was envy too at the bottom—envy in the proud patrician's breast, leaning so negligently on the cushions of his gilded chariot, with all his advantages of rank, reputation, wealth, and influence—envy of the noble bearing, the personal comeliness, and the free manly step of the slave.

“Had he struck thee, Automedon,” said his master, unable to resist taunting the petted youth who held the reins; “had he but laid a finger on thee, thou had'st never spoken again, and I had been rid of the noisiest and most useless of my household. Gently with that outside horse; dost see how he chafes upon the rein. Gently, boy, I say! and drive me back into the Forum.”

As he settled himself among the cushions and

rolled swiftly away, Myrrhina came forth into the porch, once more. She seemed, however, scarcely to notice the departing chariot, but looked dreamily about her, and then re-entered the house with a shake of the head, a smile, and something that was almost a sigh.



CHAPTER IV.

APHRODITÉ.



NEGRO boy, the ugliest of his kind, and probably all the more prized for that reason, was shifting uneasily from knee to knee, in an attitude of constraint that showed how long and tiresome he felt his office, and how wearied he was of Valeria's own apartment. Such a child, for the urchin seemed of the tenderest age, might be initiated without impropriety into the mysteries of a lady's toilet; and, indeed, the office it was his duty to undertake, formed the most indispensable part of the whole performance. With a skill and steadiness beyond his years, though with a rueful face, he was propping up an enormous mirror, in which his mistress might contemplate the whole galaxy of her charms. A mirror formed of one broad plate of silver, burnished to the brightness and lucidity of glass, set in an oval frame of richly chased

gold, wrought into fantastic patterns and studded with emeralds, rubies, and other precious stones. Not a speck was to be discerned on the polish of its dazzling surface ; and, indeed, the time of one maiden, was devoted to the task alone of preserving it from the lightest breath that might dim its brightness, and cloud the reflection of the stately form that now sat before it, undergoing, at the hands of her attendants, the pleasing tortures of an elaborate toilet.

The reflection was that of a large handsome woman in the very prime and noon-tide of her beauty. A woman whose every movement and gesture bespoke physical organization of a vigorous nature and perfect health. While the strong white neck gave grace and dignity to her carriage—while the deep bosom and somewhat massive shoulders partook more of Juno's majestic frame than Hebe's pliant youth—while the full sweep and outline of her figure denoted maturity and completeness in every part—the long round limbs, the shapely hands and feet, might have belonged to Diana, so perfect was their symmetry ; the warm flush that tinted them, the voluptuous ease of her attitude, the gentle languor of her whole bearing, would have done no discredit to the

goddess, hanging over the mountain-tops in the golden summer-nights to look down upon Endymion, and bathe her sleeping favourite in floods of light and love.

Too fastidious a critic might have objected to Valeria's form that it expressed more of physical strength than is compatible with perfect womanly beauty, that the muscles were developed overmuch, and the whole frame, despite its flowing outlines, partook somewhat of a man's organization, and a man's redundant strength. The same fault might have been found in a less degree with her countenance. There was a little too much resolution in the small aquiline nose, something of manly audacity and energy in the large well-formed mouth, with its broad white teeth that the fullest and reddest of lips could not conceal—a shade of masculine sternness on the low wide brow, smooth and white, but somewhat prominent, and scarcely softened by the arch of the marked eyebrows, or the dark sweep of the lashes that fringed the long laughing eyes.

And yet it was a face that a man, and still more a boy, could hardly have looked on without misgivings that he might too soon learn to long for its glances, its smiles, its approval, and its love. There was such a glow of health on the soft trans-

parent skin, such a freshness and vitality in the colour of those blooming cheeks, such a sparkle in the grey eyes, that flashed so meaningly when she smiled, that gleamed so clear and bright and cold when the features resumed their natural expression, grave, scornful, almost stern in their repose ; and then such womanly softness in the masses of rich nut-brown hair that showered down neck and shoulders, to form a framework for this lovely, dangerous, and too alluring picture. Even the little negro, wearied as he was, peeped at intervals from the back of the mirror he upheld, fawning like a dog for some sign of approval from his haughty, careless mistress. At length she bade him keep still, with a half-scornful smile at his antics ; and the sharp white teeth gleamed from ear to ear of the dusky little face, as it grinned with pleasure, while the boy settled himself once more in an attitude of patience and steady submission.

Nor was Valeria's apartment unworthy of the noble beauty who devoted it to the mysterious rites of dress and decoration. Everything that luxury could imagine for bodily ease, everything that science had as yet discovered for the preservation or the production of feminine attractions, was there to be found in its handsomest and costliest

form. In one recess, shrouded by transparent curtains of the softest pink, was the bath that could be heated at will to any temperature, and the marble steps of which that shapely form was accustomed to descend twice and thrice a day. In another stood the ivory couch with its quilted crimson silks and ornamented pillars of solid gold, in which Valeria slept, and dreamed such dreams as hover round the rest of those whose life is luxury, and whose business is a ceaseless career of pleasure. On a table of cedar wood, fashioned like a palm-leaf opening out from a pedestal that terminated in a single claw of grotesque shape, stood her silver night-lamp, exhaling odours of perfumed oil, and near it lay the waxen tablets, on which she made her memorandums, or composed her love-letters, and from which, as from an unfinished task, the sharp pointed steel pencil had rolled away upon the shining floor. Through the whole court,—for court it might be called, with its many entrances and recesses, its cool and shady nooks, its lofty cieling and its tessellated pavement,—choice vases, jewelled cups, burnished chalices, and exquisite little statues, were scattered in systematic irregularity, and graceful profusion. Even the very water in the

bath flowed through the mouth of a marble Cupid ; and two more winged urchins wrought in bronze, supported a stand on which was set a formidable array of perfumes, essences, cosmetics, and such material for offensive and defensive warfare.

The walls, too, of this seductive arsenal, were delicately tinted of a light rose-colour, that should throw the most becoming shade over its inmates, relieved at intervals by oval wreaths wrought out in bas-relief, enclosing diverse mythological subjects, in which the figure of Venus, goddess of love and laughter, predominated. Round the cornices stretched a frieze representing, also in relief, the fabulous contests of the Amazons with every description of monster, amongst which the most conspicuous foe was the well-known gryphon, or griffin, an abnormal quadruped, with the head and neck of a bird of prey.

It was curious to trace in the female warriors thus delineated, something of the imperious beauty, the vigorous symmetry, and the dauntless bearing that distinguished Valeria herself, though their energetic and spirited attitudes afforded, at the same time, a marked contrast to the pleasing languor that seemed to pervade every movement of that luxurious lady reclining before her mirror,

and submitting indolently to the attentions of her maid-servants.

These were five in number, and constituted the principal slaves of her household; and the most important among them seemed to be a tall matronly woman, considerably older than her comrades, who filled the responsible office of house-keeper in the establishment,—a dignity which did not, however, exempt her from insult, and even blows, when she failed to satisfy the caprices of a somewhat exacting mistress: the others, comely laughing girls, with the sparkling eyes and white teeth of their countrywomen, seemed principally occupied with the various matters that constituted their lady's toilet,—a daily penance, in which, notwithstanding the rigour of its discipline, and the severities that were sure to follow the most trifling act of negligence, they took an inexplicable and essentially feminine delight.

Of these it was obvious that Myrrhina was the first in place as in favour. She it was who brought her mistress the warm towels for her bath; who was ready with her slippers when she emerged; who handed every article of clothing as it was required; whose taste was invariably consulted, and whose decision was considered final, on such impor-

tant points as the position of a jewel, the studied negligence of a curl, or the exact adjustment of a fold.

This girl possessed, with an Italian exterior, the pliant cunning and plausible fluency of the Greek. Born a slave on one of Valeria's estates in the country, she had been reared a mere peasant, on a simple country diet, and amidst healthful country occupations, till a freak of her mistress brought her to Rome. With a woman's versatility—with a woman's quickness in adapting herself to a strange phase of life and a total change of circumstances—the country-girl had not been a year in her new situation, ere she became the acutest and cleverest waiting-maid in the capital, with what benefit to her own morals and character, it is needless to inquire. Who so quick as Myrrhina to prepare the unguents, the perfumes, or the cosmetics that repaired the injuries of climate, and effaced the marks of dissipation? Who so delicate a sempstress; who had such taste in colours; who could convey a note or a message with half such precision, simplicity, and tact? In short, who was ever so ready in an emergency, with brush, crimping-iron, needle, hand, eye, or tongue? Intrigue was her native element. To lie on her mistress's behalf, seemed as natural as on her own.

He who would advance in Valeria's good will, must begin by bribing her maid ; and many a Roman gallant had ere this discovered that even that royal road to success was as tedious as it was costly, and might lead eventually to discomfiture and disgrace.

As she took the pouncet-box from one of the girls, and proceeded to sprinkle gold-dust in Valeria's hair, Myrrhina's eye was caught by the gift of Placidus, lying neglected at her feet, the casket open, the jewels scattered on the floor. Such as it was, the waiting-maid owned a conscience. It warned her that she had not as yet worked out the value of the costly chain thrown round her neck by the Tribune.

Showering the gold-dust liberally about her lady's head, Myrrhina felt her way cautiously to the delicate theme :

“ There's a new fashion coming in for headgear when the weather gets cooler,” said she. “ It's truth, I tell you, madam, for I heard it direct from Selina, who was told by the Empress's first tirewoman, though even Cæsar himself cannot think Galeria looks well, with that yellow mop stuck all over her head. But it's to be the fashion, nevertheless, and right sorry I am to hear it ; nor am I the only one for that matter.”

“Why so?” asked Valeria, languidly; “is it more troublesome than the present?”

Myrrhina had done with the gold-dust now, and holding the comb in her mouth, was throwing a rich brown curl across her wrist, while she laid a plat carefully beneath it. Notwithstanding the impediment between her lips, however, she was able to reply with great volubility.

“The trouble counts for nothing, madam, when a lady has got such hair as yours. It’s a pleasure to run your hands through it, let alone dressing and crisping it, and plaiting it up into a crown that’s fit for a queen. That this new fashion will make us all alike, whether we’re as bald as old Lyce, or wear our curls down to our ankles, like Neæra. Still, to hide such hair as *yours*;—as my lord said, only this morning——”

“What lord? this morning!” interrupted Valeria, a dawn of interest waking on her handsome features; “not Licinius, my noble kinsman? His approval is indeed worth having.”

“Better worth than his gifts,” answered Myrrhina, pertly; pointing to the filigree basket which occupied a place of honour on the toilet-table. “Such a birthday present I never saw! A few late roses and a bunch or two of figs to the

richest lady in Rome. To be sure he sent a messenger with them, who might have come direct from Jove, and the properest man I ever set eyes on.” And Myrrhina moved to one side, that her lady might not observe the blush that rose, even to her shameless brow, as she recalled the impression made on her by the handsome slave.

Valeria liked to hear of proper men: she woke up a little out of her languor, and flung the hair back from her face.

“Go on,” said she, as Myrrhina hesitated, half eager and half loth to pursue the pleasing topic.

But the waiting-maid felt the chain round her neck, and acknowledged in her heart the equivalent it demanded.

“It was the Tribune, madam,” said she, “who spoke about your hair, Julius Placidus, who values every curl you wear, more than a whole mine of gold. Ah! there’s not a lord in Rome has such a taste in dress. Only to see him this morning, with his violet mantle and his jewels sparkling in the sun, with the handsomest chariot and the four whitest horses in the town. Well! if I was a lady, and wooed by such a man as that——”

“*Man* call you him?” interrupted her mistress, with a scornful smile. “Nay, when these curled,

perfumed, close-shaven things are called *men*, 'tis time for us women to bestir ourselves, lest strength and courage die out in Rome altogether. And you, too, Myrrhina, who know Licinius and Hippias, and saw with your own eyes two hundred gladiators in the Circus, only yesterday, you ought to be a better judge. Man, forsooth! Why you will be calling smooth-faced Paris a *man* next!"

Here maid and mistress burst out laughing, for thereby hung a tale of which Valeria was a little proud. This Paris, a young Egyptian, of beautiful but effeminate appearance, had lately come to Italy to figure with no small success on the Roman stage. His delicate features, his symmetrical shape, and the girlish graces of his pantomimic gestures, had made sad havoc in the hearts of the Roman ladies, at all times too susceptible to histrionic charms. He lost nothing, either, of public attention, by bearing the name of Nero's ill-fated favourite, and embarked at once, unhesitatingly, on the same brilliant and dangerous career. But although it was the fashion to be in love with Paris, Valeria alone never yielded to the mode, but treated him with all the placid indifference she felt for attractions that found no

favour in her sight. Stung by such neglect, the petted actor paid devoted court to the woman who despised him, and succeeded, after much importunity, in prevailing on her to accord him an interview in her own house. Of this he had the bad taste to make no small boast in anticipation; and Myrrhina, who found out most things, lost no time in informing her mistress that her condescension was already as much misrepresented as it was misplaced. The two laid their plans accordingly; and when Paris, attired in the utmost splendour, arrived panting to the promised interview, he found himself seized by some half-dozen hideous old negresses, who smothered him with caresses, stripped him from head to foot, forced him into the bath, and persisted in treating him as if he were a delicate young lady, but with a quiet violence the while, that it was useless to resist. The same swarthy firewomen then dressed him in female garments; and despite of threats, struggles, outcries, and entreaties, placed him in Valeria's litter, and so carried him home to his own door.

The ready wit of the play-actor put upon his metamorphosis the construction least favourable to the character of its originator; but he vowed

a summary vengeance, we may be sure, nevertheless.

“I think Paris knows what you think of him only too well,” resumed Myrrhina; “not but that he has a fair face of his own, and a lovely shape for dancing, though to be sure Placidus is a finer figure of a man. Oh! if you could have seen him this morning, madam, when he laid back so graceful in his chariot, and chid that pert lad of his for striking with his whip at the tall slave, who to be sure vanished like a flash of lightning, you would have said there wasn’t such another patrician in the whole city of Rome!”

“Enough of Placidus!” interrupted her mistress, impatiently, “the subject wearies me. What of this tall slave, Myrrhina, who seems to have attracted your attention? Did he look like one of the barbarians my kinsman Licinius cries up so mightily? Is he handsome enough to step with my Liburnians, think you, under the day-litter?”

The waiting-maid’s eyes sparkled as she thought how pleasant it would be to have him in the same household as herself; and any little restraint she might have experienced in running over the personal advantages that had captivated her fancy disappeared before this agreeable prospect.

“Handsome enough, madam!” she exclaimed, removing the comb from her mouth, dropping her lady’s hair, and flourishing her hands with true Italian emphasis and rapidity,—“Handsome enough! why he would make the Liburnians look like bald-headed vultures, beside a golden eagle! Barbarian, like enough he may be, Cimbrian, Frisian, Ansi-barian, or what not, for I caught the foreign accent tripping on his tongue, and we have few men in Rome of stature equal to his. A neck like a tower of marble; arms and shoulders like the statue of Hercules, yonder in the vestibule; a face, ay, twice as beautiful as Pericles, on your medallion, with the golden curls clustering round a forehead as white as milk; and eyes—”

Here Myrrhina stopped, a little at a loss for a simile, and a good deal out of breath besides.

“Go on,” said Valeria, who had been listening in an attitude of languid attention, her eyes half-closed, her lips parted, and the colour deepening on her cheek. “What were his eyes like, Myrrhina?”

“Well, they were like the blue sky of Campania in the vintage; they were like the stones round the boss of your state-mantle; they were like the sea at noonday from the long walls of

Ostia. And yet they flashed into sparks of fire when he looked at poor little Automedon. I wonder the boy wasn't frightened! I am sure I should have been, only nothing frightens those impudent young charioteers."

"Was he my kinsman's slave; are you sure, Myrrhina?" said her mistress, in an accent of studied unconcern, and never moving a finger from her listless and comfortable attitude.

"No doubt of it, madam," replied the waiting-maid; and would probably have continued to enlarge on the congenial subject, had she not been interrupted by the entrance of one of the damsels who had been summoned from the apartment, and returned to announce that Hippias, the retired gladiator, was in waiting—"Would Valeria take her fencing-lesson?"

But Valeria declined at once, and sat on before her mirror, without even raising her eyes to the tempting picture it displayed. Whatever was the subject of her thoughts it must have been very engrossing, she seemed so loth to be disturbed.



CHAPTER V.

“ROME.”



IEANWHILE the British slave, unconscious that he was already the object of Valeria's interest and Myrrhina's admiration, was threading his way through the crowded streets that adjoined the Forum, enjoying that vague sense of amusement with which a man surveys a scene of bustle and confusion that does not affect his immediate concerns.

Thanks to the favour of his master, his time was nearly at his own disposal, and he had ample leisure to observe the busiest scene in the known world, and to compare, it perhaps, with the peace and simplicity of those early days, which seemed now like the memories of a dream, so completely had they passed away.

The business of the Forum was over: the markets were disgorging their mingled stream of purveyors, purchasers, and idle lookers-on. The whole population of Rome was hurrying home to dinner, and a motley crowd it was. The citizens themselves, the Plebeians, properly so called, scarcely formed one half of the swarming assemblage. Slaves innumerable hurried to and fro, to speed the business or the pleasure of their lords; slaves of every colour and of every nation, from the Scandinavian giant, with blue eyes and waving yellow locks, to the sturdy Ethiopian, thick-lipped, and woolly-haired, the swarthy child of Africa, whose inheritance has been servitude from the earliest ages until now. Many a Roman born was there, too, amongst the servile crowd, aping the appearance and manner of a citizen, but who shrank from a master's frown at home, and who, despite the acquirement of wealth, and even the attainment of power, must die a bondsman as he had lived.

Not the least characteristic feature of the state of society under the Empire was the troop of freedmen that everywhere accompanied the person, and swelled the retinue of each powerful patrician. These manumitted slaves were usually bound by

the ties of interest as much as gratitude to the former master, who had now become their patron. Dependent on him in many cases for their daily food, doled out to them in rations at his door; they were necessarily little emancipated from his authority by their lately acquired freedom. While the relation of patron and client was productive of crying evils in the imperial city, while the former threw the shield of his powerful protection over the crimes of the latter, and the client in return became the willing pander to his patron's vices, it was the freedman who, more than all others, rendered himself the willing tool to his patrician employer, who yielded unhesitatingly, time, affections, probity, and honour itself, to the caprices of his lord. They swarmed about the Forum now, running hither and thither with the obsequious haste of the parasite, bent on errands which in too many cases, would scarce have borne the light of day.

Besides these, a vast number of foreigners, wearing the costumes of their different countries, hindered the course of traffic as they stood gaping, stupefied by the confusing scene on which they gazed. The Gaul, with his short, close-fitting garment; the Parthian, with his conical sheepskin

cap; the Mede, with his loose silken trousers; the Jew, barefoot and robed in black; the stately Spaniard, the fawning Egyptian, and amongst them all, winding his way wherever the crowd was closest, with perfect ease and self-possession, the smooth and supple Greek. When some great man passed through the midst, borne aloft in his litter, or leaning on the shoulder of a favourite slave, and freedmen and clients made a passage for him with threat, and push, and blow, the latter would invariably miss the Greek, to light on the pate of a humble mechanic, or the shoulders of a sturdy barbarian, while the descendant of Leonidas or Alcibiades would reply in whining sing-song tones to the *verbal* abuse, with some biting retort, which was sure to turn the laughter of the crowd on the aggressor.

If Rome had once overrun and conquered the dominions of her elder sister in civilization, the invasion seemed now to be all the other way. With the turn of the tide had come such an overflow of Greek manners, Greek customs, Greek morals, and Greek artifice, that the Imperial City was already losing its natural characteristics; and the very language was so interlarded with the vocabulary of the conquered, that it was fast

becoming less Latin than Greek. The Roman ladies, especially, delighted in those euphonious syllables, which clothed Athenian eloquence in such melodious rhythm ; and their choicest terms of endearment in the language of love, were invariably whispered in Greek.

That supple nation, too, adapting itself to the degradation of slavery and the indulgence of ease, as it had risen in nobler times to the exigencies of liberty and the efforts demanded by war, had usurped the greater portion of art, science, and even power, in Rome. The most talented painters and sculptors were Greeks. The most enterprising contractors and engineers were Greeks. Rhetoric and elocution could only be learned in a Greek school, and mathematics unless studied with Greek letters must be esteemed confused and useless ; the fashionable invalid who objected to consult a Greek physician deserved to die, and there was but one astrologer in Rome who could cast a patrician-horoscope. Of course he was a Greek. In the lower walks of criminal industry, in the many iniquitous professions called into existence by the luxury of a great city, the Greeks drove a thriving, and almost an exclusive trade. Whoever was in most

repute, as an evil counsellor, a low buffoon, a money-lender, pimp, pander, or parasite, whatever might be his other qualifications, was sure to be a Greek.

And many a scrutinizing glance was cast by professors of this successful nation at the Briton's manly form, as he strode through the crowd making his way quietly but surely from sheer weight and strength. They followed him with covetous eyes, as they speculated on the various purposes to which so much good manhood might be applied. They appraised him, so to speak, and took an inventory of his thews and sinews, his limbs, his stature, and his good looks; but they refrained from accosting him with importunate questions or insolent proposals, for there was a bold confident air about him, that bespoke the stout heart and the ready hand. The stamp of freedom had not yet faded from his brow, and he looked like one who was accustomed to take his own part in a crowd.

Suddenly a stoppage in the traffic arrested the moving stream, which swelled in continually to a struggling, eager, vociferating mass. A dray containing huge blocks of marble, and drawn by several files of oxen, had become entangled with

the chariot of a passing patrician, and another great man's litter being checked by the obstruction, much confusion and bad language was the result. Amused with the turmoil, and in no hurry to get home, the British slave, stood looking over the heads of the populace at the irritated and gesticulating antagonists, when a smart blow on the shoulder, caused him to wheel suddenly round, prepared to return the injury with interest, At the same instant a powerful hand dragged him back by the tunic, and a grasp was laid on him, from which he could not shake himself free, while a rough good-humoured voice whispered in his ear,

“Softly, lad, softly! Keep hands off Cæsar's lictors an' thou be'st not mad in good earnest. These gentry give more than they take, I can promise thee!”

The speaker was a broad powerful man of middle size, with the chest of a Hercules; he held the Briton firmly pinioned in his arms while he spoke, and it was well that he did so, for the lictors were indeed forcing a passage for the Emperor himself, who was proceeding on foot, and as far as was practicable *incog*, to inspect the fish-market.

Vitellius shuffled along with the lagging step of an infirm and bloated old man. His face was

pale and flabby, his eye dim, though sparkling at intervals with some little remnant of the ready wit and pliant humour that had made him the favourite of three emperors ere he himself attained the Purple. Supported by two freedmen, preceded and followed only by a file of lictors, and attended by three or four slaves, Cæsar was taking his short walk in hopes of acquiring some little appetite for dinner: what locality so favourable for the furtherance of this object as the fish-market, where the imperial glutton could feast his eyes, if nothing else, on the choicest dainties of the deep? He was so seldom seen abroad in Rome, that the Briton could not forbear following him with his glance, while his new friend, relaxing his hold with great caution, whispered once more in his ear:

“Ay, look well at him, man, and give Jove thanks thou art not an emperor. There’s a shape for the Purple! There’s a head to carry a diadem! Well, well, for all he’s so white and flabby now, like a Lucrine turbot, he could drive a chariot once, and hold his own at sword and buckler with the best of them. They say he can drink as well as ever still. Not that he was a match for Nero in his best days, even at that

game. Ay, ay, they may talk as they will, we've never had an emperor like *him* before nor since. Wine, women, shows, sacrifices, wild beast fights ;—a legion of men all engaged in the circus at once ! Such a friend as he was to *our* trade."

"And that trade?" inquired the Briton good-humouredly enough, now his hands were free: "I think I can guess it without asking too many questions."

"No need to guess," replied the other. "I'm not ashamed of my trade, nor of my name neither. May-be you have heard of Hirpinus, the Gladiator? Tuscan born, free Roman citizen, and willing to match himself with any man of his weight, on foot or on horseback, blindfold or half-armed, in or out of a war-chariot, with two swords, sword and buckler, or sword or spear. Any weapon, and every weapon, always excepting the net, and the noose. Those I can't bear talking about—to my mind they are not fair fighting. But what need I tell *you* all about it?" he added, running his eye over the slave's powerful frame. "I must surely have seen you before. You look as if you belonged to the family* yourself!"

* A technical term for a school of gladiators trained by the same master.

The slave smiled, not insensible to the compliment.

“’Tis a manlier way of getting bread than most of the employments I see practised in Rome,” was his reply, though he spoke more to himself, than his companion. “A man might die a worse death than in the amphitheatre,” he added, meditatively.

“A worse death !” echoed Hirpinus. “He could scarce die a better ! Think of the rows of heads one upon another piled up like apples, to the very awnings. Think of the patricians and senators wagering their collars and bracelets, and their sesterces in millions, on the strength of your arm, and the point of your blade. Think of your own vigour and manhood, trained till you feel as strong as an elephant, and as lithe as a panther, with an honest wooden buckler on your arm, and two feet of pliant steel in your hand, as you defile by Cæsar, and bid him, ‘*Good-morrow, from those who have come here to die ?*’ Think of the tough bout with your antagonist, foot to foot, hand to hand, eye to eye, feeling his blade with your own (why a *swordsman*, lad, can fence as well in the dark as the daylight !), foiling his passes, drawing his attack, learning his feints,

watching your opportunity : when you catch it at last, in you dash like a wild-cat, and the guard of your sword rings sharp and true, against his breast-bone, as he goes over backwards on the sand !”

“And if *he* gets the opportunity first ?” asked the slave, interested in spite of himself at the enthusiasm which carried him irresistibly along with it. “If *your* guard is an inch too high, *your* return a thought too slow ? If *you* go backwards on the sand, with the hilt at *your* breast-bone, and the two feet of steel in *your* bosom ? How does it feel then ?”

“Faith, lad, you must cross the Styx, to have that question fairly answered,” replied the other. “I have had no such experience yet. When it comes I shall know how to meet it. But this talking makes a man thirsty, and the sun is hot enough to bake a negro here. Come with *me*, lad ! I know a shady nook, where we can pierce a skin of wine, and afterwards play a game at quoits, or have a bout of wrestling, to wile away the afternoon.”

The slave was nothing loth. Besides the debt of gratitude he owed for preservation from a serious danger, there was something in his new

friend's rough, good-humoured, and athletic manhood that won on the Briton's favour. Hirpinus, with even more than their fierce courage, had less than the usual brutality of his class, and possessed besides a sort of quaint and careless good-humour, by no means rare amongst the athletes of every time, which found its way at once to the natural sympathies of the slave. They started off accordingly, on the most amicable terms, in search of that refreshment which a few hours' exposure to an Italian sun rendered very desirable; but the crowd had not yet cleared off, and their progress was necessarily somewhat slow, notwithstanding that the throng of passengers gave way readily enough before two such stalwart and athletic forms.

Hirpinus thought it incumbent on him to take the Briton, as it were, under his protection, and to point out to him the different objects of interest, and the important personages, to be seen at that hour in the streets of the capital, totally irrespective of the fact, that his pupil was as well instructed on these points as himself. But the gladiator dearly loved a listener, and, truth to tell, was extremely diffuse in his narratives when he had got one to his mind. These generally turned on his own

physical prowess, and his deadly exploits in the amphitheatre, which he was by no means disposed to underrate. There are some *really* brave men who are also boasters, and Hirpinus was one of them.

He was in the midst of a long dissertation on the beauties of an encounter fought out between naked combatants, armed only with the sword, and was explaining at great length a certain fatal thrust outside his antagonist's guard, and over his elbow, which he affirmed to be his own invention, and irresistible by any parry yet discovered, when the slave felt his gown plucked by a female hand, and turning sharply round was somewhat disconcerted to find himself face to face with Valeria's waiting-maid.

"You are wanted," said she unceremoniously, and with an imperious gesture. "You are to come to my lady this instant. Make haste, man; she cannot brook waiting."

Myrrhina pointed while she spoke, to where a closed litter borne aloft by four tall Liburnian slaves, had stopped the traffic, and already become the *nucleus* of a crowd. A white hand peeped through its curtains, as the slave approached, surprised and somewhat abashed at this unexpected appeal.

Hirpinus looked on with grave approval the while. Arriving close beneath the litter, of which the curtain was now open, the slave paused and made a graceful obeisance; then drawing himself up proudly, stood erect before it, looking unconsciously his best, in the pride of his youth and beauty. Valeria's cheek was paler than usual, and her attitude more languid, but her grey eyes sparkled, and a smile played round her mouth as she addressed him.

“Myrrhina tells me that you are the man who brought a basket of flowers to my house this morning from Licinius. Why did you not wait to carry back my salutations to my kinsman?”

The colour mounted to the slave's brow as he thought of Automedon's insolence, but he only replied humbly, “Had I known it was your wish, lady, I had been standing in your porch till now.”

She marked his rising colour, and attributed it to the effect of her own dazzling beauty.

“Myrrhina knew you at once in the crowd,” said she, graciously; “and indeed yours is a face and figure not easily mistaken in Rome. I should recognize you myself anywhere now.”

She paused expecting a suitable reply, but the

slave, albeit not insensible to the compliment, only blushed again and was silent.

Valeria, meanwhile, whose motives in summoning him to her litter had been in the first instance of simple curiosity to see the stalwart barbarian who had so excited Myrrhina's admiration, and whom that sharp-sighted damsel had recognized in an instant amongst the populace, now found herself pleased and interested by the quiet demeanour and noble bearing of this foreign slave. She had always been susceptible to manly beauty, and here she beheld it, in its noblest type. She was rapacious of admiration in all quarters; and here she could not but flatter herself she gathered an undoubted tribute to the power of her charms. She owned all a woman's interest in anything that had a spice of mystery or romance, and a woman's unfailing instinct in discovering high birth and gentle breeding under every disguise; and here she found a delightful puzzle in the manner and appearance of her kinsman's messenger, whose position seemed so at variance with his looks. She had never in her life laid the slightest restraint on her thoughts, and but little on her actions—she had never left a purpose unfulfilled, nor a wish ungratified—but a strange and new feeling, at which

even her courageous nature quailed, seemed springing up in her heart while she gazed with half-closed eyes at the Briton, and hesitated to confess, even to herself, that she had never seen such a man as this in her life before.

It was in a softened tone that she again addressed him, moving on her couch to show an ivory shoulder and a rounded arm to the best advantage.

“You are a confidential servant of my kinsman’s? You are attached to his person, and always to be found in his household?” she asked, more with a view of detaining him than for any fixed purpose.

“I would give my life for Licinius!” was the prompt and spirited reply.

“But you are gentle born,” she resumed, with increasing interest; “how came you in your present dress, your present station? Licinius has never mentioned you to me. I do not even know your name. What is it?”

“Esca,” answered the slave proudly, and looking the while anything but a slave.

“Esca,” she repeated, dwelling on the syllables, with a slow soft cadence, “Esca, ’tis none of our Latin names; but that I might have known already.—Who, and what are you?”

There was something of defiance in the melancholy tone with which he answered :

“ A prince in my own country, and a chief of ten thousand. A barbarian, and a slave in Rome.”

She gave him her hand to kiss, with a gesture of pity that was almost a caress, and then, as though ashamed of her own condescension, bade the Liburnians angrily to “ go on.”

Esca looked long and wistfully after the litter as it disappeared ; but Hirpinus clapping him on the back with his heavy hand burst into a hearty laugh while he declared :

“ ’Tis a clear case, comrade. ‘ Came, saw, and conquered,’ as the great soldier said. I have known it a hundred times, but always to men of muscle like thee and me. By Castor and Pollux ! lad, thou art in luck. Ay, ay, ’tis always so. She takes thee for a gladiator, and they’ll look at nothing but a gladiator now. Come on, brother ; we’ll drink a cup to every letter of her name !”



CHAPTER VI.

THE WORSHIP OF ISIS.

IT was the cool and calming hour of sunset. Esca was strolling quietly homewards after the pursuits of the day. He had emptied a wine-skin with Hirpinus; and, resisting that worthy's entreaties to mark so auspicious a meeting by a debauch, had accompanied him to the gymnasium, where the Briton's magnificent strength and prowess raised him higher than ever in the opinion of the experienced athlete. Untiring as were the trained muscles of the professional, he found himself unable to cope with the barbarian in such exercises as demanded chiefly untaught physical power and length of limb. In running, leaping, and wrestling Esca was more than a match for the gladiator. In hurling the quoit, and fencing with

wooden foils, the latter's constant practice gave him the advantage, and when he fastened round his wrists and hands the leathern thong or *cestus*, used for the same purpose as our modern boxing-glove, and proposed a round or two of that manly exercise to conclude with, he little doubted that his own science, and experience, would afford him an easy victory. The result, however, was far different from his expectations. His antagonist's powers were especially adapted to this particular kind of contest, his length of limb, his quickness of eye, hand, and foot, his youthful elasticity of muscle, and his unfailing wind, rendered him an invincible combatant, and it was with something like pique that Hirpinus was compelled to confess as much to himself.

At the end of the first round he was satisfied of his mistake in underrating so formidable an opponent. Ere the second was half through, he had exhausted all the resources of his own skill without gaining the slightest advantage over his antagonist; and with the conclusion of a third, he flung away the *cestus* in well-feigned disgust at the heat of the weather, and proposed one more skin of wine before parting, to drink success to the profession, and speedy employment for the

gladiators at the approaching games in the amphitheatre.

“Join us, man!” said Hirpinus, dropping something of the patronizing air he had before affected. “Thou wert born to be a swordsman. Hippias would teach thee in a week to hold thine own against the best fencers in Rome. I myself will look to thy food, thy training, and thy private practice. Thou wouldst gain thy liberty easily, after a few victories. Think it over, man! and when thou hast decided, come to the fencing-school yonder, and ask for old Hirpinus. The steel may have a speck of rust on it, but it’s tough and true still; so fare thee well, lad. I count to hear from thee again before long!”

The gladiator accordingly rolled off with more than his usual assumption of manly independence, attributable to the measure of rough Sabine wine of which he had drank his full share, whilst the Briton walked quietly away in the direction of his home, enjoying the cool breeze that fanned his brow, and following out a train of vague and complicated reflections, originating in the advice of his late companion.

The crimson glow of a summer evening had faded into the serene beauty of a summer night.

Stars were flashing out, one by one, with mellow lustre, not glimmering faintly, as in our northern climate, but hanging like silver lamps, in the infinity of the sky. The busy turmoil of the streets had subsided to a low and drowsy hum; the few chance passengers who still paced them went softly and at leisure, as though enjoying the soothing influence of the hour. Even here, in the great city, everything seemed to breathe of peace, and contentment, and repose. Esca walked slowly on, lost in meditation.

Suddenly the clash of cymbals and the sound of voices struck upon his ear. A wild and fitful melody, rising and falling with strange thrilling cadence, was borne upon the breeze. Even while he stopped to listen, it swelled into a full harmonious chorus, and he recognized the chant of the worshippers of Isis, returning from the unholy celebration of her rites. Soon the glare of torches heralded its approach, and the tumultuous procession wound round the corner of the street with all the strange grotesque ceremonies of their order. Clashing their cymbals, dashing their torches together till the sparks flew up in showers, tossing their bare arms aloft with frantic gestures, the smooth-faced priests, having

girt their linen garments tightly round their loins, were dancing to and fro before the image of the goddess with bacchanalian energy. Some were bare-headed, some crowned with garlands of the lotus-leaf, and some wore masks representing the heads of dogs and other animals; but all, though leaping wildly here and there, danced in the same step, all used the same mysterious gestures of which the meaning was only known to the initiated. The figure of the goddess herself was borne aloft on the shoulders of two sturdy priests, fat, oily, smooth, and sensual, with the odious look of their kind. It represented a stately woman crowned with the lotus, holding a four-barred lyre in her hand. Gold and silver tinsel was freely scattered over her flowing garments, and jewels of considerable value, the gifts of unusually fervent devotees, might be observed upon her bosom and around her neck and arms. Behind her were carried the different symbols by which her qualities were supposed to be typified: amongst these an image of the sacred cow, wrought in frosted silver with horns and hoofs of gold, showed the most conspicuous, borne aloft as it was by an acolyte in the wildest stage of inebriety, and wavering, with the uncertain

movements of its bearer, over the heads of the throng.

In the van moved the priests, bloated eunuchs clad in white; behind these came the sacred images carried by younger votaries, who aspiring to the sacerdotal office and already prepared for its functions, devoted themselves assiduously in the mean time to the orgies with which it was their custom to celebrate the worship of their deity. Maddened with wine, bare-limbed and with dishevelled locks, they danced frantically to and fro, darting at intervals from their ranks, and compelling the passengers whom they met to turn behind them, and help to swell the rear of the procession. This was formed of a motley crew. Rich and poor, old and young, the proud patrician and the squalid slave, were mingled together in turbulent confusion; and it was difficult to distinguish those who formed a part of the original pageant from the idlers who had attached themselves to it, and having caught the contagious excitement, vociferated as loudly, and leaped about as wildly, as the initiated themselves.

Amongst these might be seen some of the fairest and proudest faces in Rome. Noble matrons reared in luxury, under the very

busts of those illustrious ancestors who had been counsellors of kings, defenders of the commonwealth, senators of the empire, thought it no shame to be seen reeling about the public streets, unveiled and flushed with wine in the company of the most notorious and profligate of their sex. A multitude of torches shed their glare on the upturned faces of the throng, and on one that looked, with its scornful lips and defiant brow, to have no business there. Amongst the wildest of these revellers, Valeria's haughty head moved on, towering above the companions, with whom she seemed to have nothing in common, save a fierce determination to set modesty and propriety at defiance.

Esca caught her glance as she swept by. She blushed crimson he observed even in the torch-light, and seemed for an instant to shrink behind the portly form of a priest who marched at her side; but immediately recovering herself, moved on with a gradually paling cheek, and a haughtier step than before.

He had little leisure, however, to observe the scornful beauty, whose charms, to tell the truth, had made no slight impression on his imagination, for a disturbance at its head, which had now

passed him some distance, had stopped the progress of the whole procession, and no small confusion was the result.

The torch-bearers were hurrying to the front. The silver cow had fallen and been replaced in an upright position more than once. The goddess herself had nearly shared the same fate. The sacred chant had ceased, and instead a hundred tongues were vociferating at once, some in anger, some in expostulation, some in mandlin ribaldry and mirth. "Let her go!" cried one. "Hold her fast!" shouted another. "Bring her along with you," reasoned a drunken acolyte. "If she be worthy she will conform to the worship of the goddess. If she be unworthy she shall experience the divine wrath of Isis!" "Mind what you are about," interposed a more cautious votary. "She is a Roman maiden," said one. "She's a barbarian!" shrieked another. "A Mede!" "A Spaniard!" "A Persian!" "A Jewess! A Jewess!"

In the meantime, the unfortunate cause of all this turmoil, a young girl closely veiled and dressed in black, was struggling in the arms of a large unwieldy eunuch, who had seized her, as a hawk pounces on a pigeon, and despite her ago-

nized entreaties, for the poor thing was in mortal fear, held her ruthlessly in his grasp. She had been surrounded by the lawless band, ere she was aware, as she glided quietly round the street corner, on her homeward way, had shrunk up against the wall in the desperate hope she might remain unobserved or unmolested, and found herself, as was to be expected, an immediate object of insult to the dissolute and licentious crew. Though her dress was torn and her arms bruised in the unmanly violence to which she was subjected, with true feminine modesty she kept her veil closely drawn round her face, and resisted every effort for its removal, with a firm strength, of which those slender wrists seemed hardly capable.

As the eunuch grasped her with drunken violence, bending his huge body and bloated face over the shrinking figure of the girl, she could not suppress one piercing shriek for help, though even while it left her lips, she felt how futile it must be, and how utterly hopeless was her situation. It was echoed by a hundred voices in tones of mockery and derision.

Little did Spado, for such was the eunuch's name, little did Spado think how near was the aid for

which his victim called,—how sudden would be the reprisals that should astonish himself with their prompt and complete redress, reminding him of what he had long forgotten, the strength of a *man's* blow, and the weight of a *man's* arm. At the first sound of the girl's voice, Esca had forced his way through the crowd to her assistance. In three strides he had come up with her assailant, and laid his heavy grasp on Spado's fat shoulder, while he bade him in low determined accents to release his prey. The eunuch smiled insolently, and replied with a brutal jest. Valeria, interested in spite of herself, could not resist an impulse to press forward and see what was going on. Long afterwards she delighted to recall the scene she now beheld with far more of exultation and excitement than alarm. It had indeed especial attraction for an imagination like hers.

Standing out in the red glare of the torches, like the bronze statue of some demigod starting into life, towered the tall figure of Esca, defiance in his attitude, anger on his brow, and resistless strength in the quivering outline of each sculptured limb. Within arm's length of him, the obese, ungraceful shape of Spado, with his broad fat face, expressive chiefly of gluttony and sensual

enjoyment, but wearing now an ugly look of malice and apprehension. Starting back from his odious embrace to the utmost length of her outstretched arms, the veiled form of the frightened girl, her head turned from the eunuch, her hands pressed against his chest, every line of her figure denoting the extreme of horror, and aversion, and disgust. Round the three, a shifting mass of grinning faces, and tossing arms, and wild bacchanalian gestures; the whole rendered more grotesque and unnatural by the lurid, flickering light. With an unaccountable fascination Valeria watched for the result.

“Let her go!” repeated Esca, in the distinct accents with which a man speaks who is about to strike, tightening at the same time a gripe which went into the eunuch’s soft flesh like iron.

Spado howled in mingled rage and fear, but released the girl nevertheless, who cowered instinctively close to her protector.

“Help!” shouted the eunuch, looking round for assistance from his comrades. “Help! I say. —Will ye see the priest mishandled and the goddess reviled? Down with him! down with him, comrades, and *keep* him down!” *

There is little doubt that had Esca’s head once

touched the ground it had never risen again, for the priests were crowding about him with wild yells and savage eyes, and the fierce revelry of a while ago was fast warming into a thirst for blood. Valeria thrust her way into the circle, though she never feared for the Briton—not for an instant.

It was getting dangerous though to remain any longer amongst this frantic crew. Esca wound one arm round the girl's waist and opposed the other shoulder to the throng. Spado, encouraged by his comrades, struck wildly at the Briton, and made a furious effort to recover his prey.

Esca drew himself together like a panther about to spring, then his long sinewy arm flew out with the force and impulse of a catapult, and the eunuch, reeling backwards, fell heavily to the ground, with a gash upon his cheek like the wound inflicted by a sword.

"Euge!" exclaimed Valeria, in a thrill of admiration and delight. "Well struck, by Hercules! Ah! these barbarians have at least the free use of their limbs. Why the priest went down like a white ox at the Mucian Gate. Is he much hurt, think ye? Will he rise again?"

The last sentence was addressed to the throng

who now crowded round the prostrate Spade, and was but the result of that pity which is never quite dormant in a woman's breast. The fallen eunuch seemed indeed in no hurry to get upon his legs again. He rolled about in hideous discomfiture, and gave vent to his feelings in loud and pitiful moans and lamentations.

After such an example of the Briton's prowess, none of her other votaries seemed to think it incumbent on them to vindicate the majesty of the goddess by further interference with the maiden and her protector. Supporting and almost carrying her drooping form, Esca hurried her away with swift firm strides, pausing and looking back at intervals, as though loth to leave his work half finished, and by no means unwilling to renew the contest. The last Valeria saw of him was the turn of his noble head bending down with a courteous and protecting gesture, to console and reassure his frightened charge.

All her womanly instincts revolted at that moment from the odious throng with whom she was involved. She could have found it in her heart to envy that obscure and unknown girl hurrying away yonder through the darkening streets on the arm of her powerful protector,

could have wished herself a peasant or a slave, with some one being in the world to look up to, and to love. Valeria's life had been that of a spoiled child from the day she left her cradle,—that gilded cradle over which the nurses had repeated their customary Roman blessing with an emphasis that in her case seemed to be prophetic :

“May monarchs woo thee, darling! to their bed,
And roses blossom where thy footsteps tread!”

The metaphorical flowers of wealth, prosperity and admiration, did indeed seem to spring up beneath her feet, and her stately beauty would have done no discredit to an imperial bride ; but it must have been something more than outward pomp and show—something nobler than the purple and the diadem—that could have won its way to Valeria's heart.

She was habituated to the beautiful, the costly, the refined, till she had learned to consider such qualities as the mere essentials of life. It seemed to her a simple matter of course that houses should be noble, and chariots luxurious, and horses swift, and men brave. The *nil admirari* was the maxim of the class in which she lived ; and whilst their standard was thus placed at the

superlative, that which came up to it received no credit for excellence, that which fell short was treated with disapproval and contempt. Valeria's life had been one constant round of pleasure and amusement; yet she was not happy, not even contented. Day by day she felt the want of some fresh interest, some fresh excitement; and it was this craving probably, more than innate depravity, which drove her, in common with many of her companions, into such disgraceful scenes as were enacted at the worship of Juno, Isis, and the other gods and goddesses of mythology.

Lovers, it is needless to say, Valeria had won in plenty. Each new face possessed for her but the attraction of its novelty. The favourite of the hour had small cause to plume himself on his position. For the first week he interested her curiosity, for the second he pleased her fancy, after which, if he was wise, he took his leave gracefully, ere he was bidden to do so with a frankness that admitted of no misconception. Perhaps the only person in the world whom she respected was her kinsman Licinius; and this, none the less, that she possessed no kind of influence over his feelings or his opinions, that she well knew he viewed her proceedings often with

disapprobation, and entertained for her character a kindly pity not far removed from contempt. Even Julius Placidus, who was the most persevering, as he was the craftiest, of her adorers, had made no impression on her heart. She appreciated his intellect, she was amused with his conversation, she approved of his deep schemes, his lavish extravagance, his unprincipled recklessness ; but she never thought of him for an instant after he was out of her sight, and there was something in the cold-blooded ferocity of his character from which, even in his presence, she unconsciously recoiled. Perhaps she admired the person of Hippias her fencing-master, a retired gladiator, who combined handsome regularity of features with a certain worn and warlike air, not without its charm, more than that of any man whom she had yet seen, and with all her pride and her cold exterior Valeria was a woman to be captivated by the eye ; but Hippias, from his professional reputation, was the darling of half the matrons in Rome, and it may be that she only followed the example of her friends, with whom at this period of the Empire, it was considered a proof of the highest fashion, and the best taste, to be in love with a gladiator.

Strong in her passions, as in her physical organization, the former were only bridled by an unbending pride, and an intensity of will more than masculine in its resolution. As under that smooth skin, the muscles of the round white arm were firm and hard like marble, so beneath that fair and tranquil bosom, there beat a heart that for good or evil could dare, endure, and defy the worst. Valeria was a woman whom none but a very bold or very ignorant suitor would have taken to his breast; yet it may be that the right man could have tamed, and made her gentle and patient as the dove.

And now something seemed to tell her that the void in her heart was filled at last. Esca's manly beauty had made a strong impression on her senses; the anomaly of his position had captivated her imagination; there was something very attractive in the mystery that surrounded him; there was even a wild thrill of pleasure in the shame of loving a slave. Then, when he stood forth, the champion of that poor helpless girl, brave, handsome, and victorious, the charm was complete; and Valeria's eyes followed him as he disappeared with a longing loving look, that had never glistened in them in her life before.

The Briton hurried away with his arm round the drooping figure of his companion, and for a time forbore to speak a word even of encouragement or consolation. At first the reaction of her feelings turned her sick and faint, then a burst of weeping came to her relief; ere long the tears were flowing silently; and the girl, who indeed showed no lack of courage, had recovered herself sufficiently to look up in her protector's face, and pour out her thanks with a quiet earnestness that showed they came direct from the heart.

"I can trust you," she said, in a voice of peculiar sweetness, though her Latin, like his own, was touched with a slightly foreign accent. "I can read a brave man's face, none better—we have not far to go now. You will take me safe home?"

"I will guard you to your very door," said he, in tones of the deepest respect. "But you need fear nothing now, the drunken priests and their mysterious deity are far enough off by this time. 'Tis a noble worship truly for such a city as this! The mistress of the world."

"False gods! false gods!" replied the girl, very earnestly. "Oh how can men be so blind! so degraded!" Here she stopped suddenly, and

clung closer to her companion's arm, drawing her veil tighter round her face the while. Her quick ear had caught the sound of hurrying footsteps, and she dreaded pursuit.

"'Tis nothing," said Esca, encouraging her; "the most we have to dread now is some drunken freedman or client reeling home from his patron's supper-table. They are a weakly race, these Roman citizens," he added, good-humouredly; "I think I can promise to stave them off if they come not more than a dozen at a time."

The cheerful tone reassured her no less than the strong arm to which she clung. It was delightful to feel so safe after the fright she had undergone. The footsteps were indeed those of a few dissolute idlers loitering home after a debauch. They had hastened forward on espying a female figure; but there was something in the air of her protector that forbade a near approach, and they shrunk to the other side of the way rather than come in contact with so powerful an opponent. The girl felt proud of her escort, and safer every minute.

By this time she had guided him into a dark and narrow street, at the end of which the Tiber might be seen gleaming under the star-lit sky.

She stopped at a mean-looking door, let into a dead-wall, and applying her hand to a secret spring, it opened noiselessly to her touch. Then she turned to face her companion, and said frankly, "I have not thanked you half enough. Will you not enter our poor dwelling, and share with us a morsel of food, and a cup of wine, ere you depart upon your way?"

Esca was neither hungry nor thirsty, yet he bowed his head, and followed her into the house.



CHAPTER VII.

TRUTH.

THE dwelling in which the Briton now found himself presented a strange contrast of simplicity and splendour, of wealth and frugality, of obscure poverty and costly refinement. The wall was bare and weather-stained ; but a silver lamp, burning perfumed oil, was fixed against its surface on a bracket of common deal. Though the stone floor was damp and broken, it was partially covered by a soft thick carpet of brilliant colours, while shawls from the richest looms of Asia, hung over the mutilated wooden seats and the crazy couch which appeared to be the congenial furniture of the apartment. Esca could not but remark on the same inconsistency, throughout all the minor details of the household. A measure of rich wine

from the Lebanon, was cooling in a pitcher of coarse earthenware, a draught of fair water sparkled in a cup of gold. A bundle of eastern javelins, inlaid with ivory and of beautiful finish and workmanship, kept guard, as it were, over a plain two-edged sword devoid of ornament, and with a handle frayed and worn as though from constant use, that looked like a weapon born for work not show, some rough soldier's rude but trusty friend. The room of which Esca thus caught a hasty glance as he passed through, opened on an inner apartment which seemed to have been originally equally bare and dilapidated, but of which the furniture was even more rich and incongruous. It was flooded by a soft warm light, shed from a lamp burning some rare Syrian oil, that was scarcely to be procured for money in Rome. It dazzled Esca's eyes as he followed the girl through the outer apartment into this retreat, and it was a few seconds ere he recovered his sight sufficiently to take note of the objects that surrounded him.

A venerable man with bald head and long silvery beard was sitting at the table when they entered, reading from a roll of parchment filled to the very margin with characters in the Syriac language, then generally spoken over the whole

of Asia Minor, and sufficiently familiar at Rome, So immersed was he in his studies, that he did not seem to notice her arrival, till the girl rushed up to him and without unveiling, threw herself into his arms with many expressions of endearment and delight at her own return. The language in which she spoke was unknown to the Briton ; but he gathered from her gestures, and the agitation which again overcame her for an instant, that she was relating her own troubles, and the part he had himself borne in the adventures of the night. Presently she turned, and drew him forward, while she said in Latin, with a little sob of agitation between every sentence,

“ Behold my preserver ! The youth who came in like a lion to save me from those wicked men. Thank him in my father’s name, and yours, and all my kindred and all my tribe. Bid him welcome to the best our house affords. It is not every day a daughter of Judah meets with an arm and a heart like his, when she falls into the grasp of the heathen and the oppressor ! ”

The old man stretched his hand to Esca with cordiality and good-will : as he did so, the Briton could not but observe how kindly was the smile that mantled over his serene and gentle face.

“My brother will be home ere long,” said he, “and will himself thank you for preserving his daughter from insult and worse. Meantime Calchas bids you heartily welcome to Eleazar’s house. Mariamne,” he added, turning to the girl, “prepare us a morsel of food that we may eat. It is not the custom of our nation to send a stranger fasting from the door.”

The girl departed on her hospitable mission, and Esca making light of his prowess, and of the danger incurred, gave his own version of the night’s occurrence, to which Calchas listened with grave interest and approval. When he had concluded, the old man pointed to the scroll he had been reading, which now lay rolled up on the table at his hand.

“The time will come,” said he, “when the words that are written here shall be in the mouths of all men on the surface of the known earth. Then shall there be no more strife, nor oppression, nor suffering, nor sorrow. Then shall men love each other like brothers, and live only in kindness and good-will. The day may seem far distant, and the means may seem poor and inadequate now, yet so it is written here, and so will it be at last.”

“You think that Rome will extend her dominions farther and farther? That she will conquer all known nations, as she has conquered us? That she means to be in fact what she proudly styles herself, ‘The Mistress of the World?’ In truth the Eagle’s wings are wide and strong. His beak is very sharp, and where his talons have once fastened themselves, they never again let go their hold!”

Calchas smiled and shook his head.

“The Dove will prevail against the Eagle, as love is a stronger power than hate. But it is not of Rome I speak as the future influence that shall establish the great good on earth. The Legions are indeed well-trained, and brave even to the death; but I know of soldiers in a better service than Cæsar’s, whose warfare is harder, whose watches are longer, whose adversaries are more numerous, but whose triumph is more certain, and more glorious at the last.”

Esca looked as if he understood him not. The Briton’s thoughts were wandering back to the tramp of columns and the clash of steel, and the gallant stand made against the invader by the white-robed warriors with their long swords, amongst whom he had been one of the boldest and the best.

“It is hard to strive against Rome,” said he,

with a glowing cheek and sparkling eye. "Yet I cannot but think if we had never been provoked to an attack; if we had kept steadily on the defensive, if we had moved inland as he approached, harassing and cutting him off whenever we saw an opportunity, but never suffering him to make one for himself—trusting more to our woods and rivers, and less to our own right hands—we might have tamed the Eagle and clipped his wings, and beat him back across the sea at last. But what have I to do with such matters now?" he added, while his whole countenance fell in bitter humiliation. "I, a poor barbarian captive, and a slave here in Rome!"

Calchas studied his face with a keen scrutinizing glance, then he laid his hand on the young man's shoulder, and said, inquiringly,

"There is not a grey hair in your clustering locks, nor a wrinkle on your brow, yet you have known sorrow?"

"Who has not?" replied the other cheerfully, "and yet I never thought to have come to this."

"You are a slave, and you would be free?" asked Calchas, slowly and impressively.

"I am a slave," repeated the Briton, "and I shall be free. But not till death."

“And after death?” proceeded the old man, in the same gentle inquiring tone.

“After death,” answered the other, “I shall be free as the elements I have been taught to worship, and into which they tell me I shall be resolved. What need I know or care more than that in death there will be neither pleasure nor pain?”

“And is not life with all its changes too sweet to lose on such terms as these?” asked the older man. “Are you content to believe that, like one walking through a quicksand, the footsteps you leave are filled up, and obliterated behind you as you pass on? Can you bear to think that yesterday is indeed banished and gone for ever? That a to-morrow must come of black and endless night? Death should be really terrible if this is your conviction, and your creed!”

“Death is never terrible to a brave man,” answered Esca. “A Briton need not be taught how to die sword in hand.”

“You think you are brave,” said Calchas, looking wistfully on the other’s rising colour and kindling eyes. “Ah! you have not seen my comrades die, or you would know that something better than courage is required for the

service to which we belong. What think ye of weak women, tender shrinking maidens, worn with fatigue, emaciated with hunger, fainting with heat and thirst, brought out to be devoured by beasts, or to suffer long and agonizing tortures, yet smiling the while in quiet calm contentment, as seeing the home to which they are hastening, the triumph but a few short hours off? What think ye of the captains under whom I served, who here at Rome, in the face of Cæsar and his power, vindicated the honour of their Lord and died without a murmur for his cause? I was with Peter, I tell you, Peter the Galilean, of whom men talk to this day, of whom men shall never cease to talk in after ages, when he opposed to Simon's magic arts his simple faith in the Master whom he served, and I saw the magician hurled like a stricken vulture to the ground. I was present when the fiercest and the wickedest of the Cæsars, returning from the expedition to Greece, wherein his buffooneries had earned the contempt even of that subtle nation of flatterers, sentenced him to death upon the cross for that he had dared to oppose Nero's vices, and to tell Nero the truth. I heard him petition that he might be crucified with his head downward, as not worthy

to suffer in the same posture as his Lord—and I can see him now, the pale face, the noble head, the dark keen eye, the slender sinewy form, and above all, the self-sustaining confidence, the triumphant daring of the man as he walked fearlessly to death. I was with Paul, the noble Pharisee, the naturalized Roman citizen, when he alone amongst a crowd of passengers and a century of soldiers, quailed not to look on the black waves raging round our broken ship, and bade us all be of good cheer, for that every soul, to the number of two hundred and seventy-five, should come safe to shore. I remember how trustfully we looked on that low spare form, that grave and gracious face with its kindly eyes, its bushy brows and thick beard sprinkled here and there with grey. It was the soul we knew that sustained and strengthened the weakly body of the man. The very barbarians where we landed acknowledged its influence, and would fain have worshipped him for a God. Nero might well fear that quiet, humble, trusting, yet energetic nature ; and where the imperial monster feared, as where he admired, loved, hated, envied, or despised, the sentiment must be quenched in blood.”

“ And did he too fall a victim ? ” inquired Esca.

whose interest, notwithstanding occasional glances at the door through which Mariamne had gone out, seemed thoroughly awakened by the old man's narrative.

"They might not crucify him," answered Calchas, "for he was of noble lineage and a Roman citizen born; but they took him from amongst us, and they let him languish in a prison, till they released him at last and brought him out to be beheaded. Ay, Rome was a fearful sight that day; the foot was scorched as it trod the ashes of the devastated city, the eye smarted in the lurid smoke that hung like a pall upon the heavy air and would not pass away. Palaces were crumbling in ruins, the shrivelled spoils of an empire were blackening around, the dead were lying in the choked-up highways half-festering, half-consumed—orphan children were wandering about starved and shivering, with sallow faces and large shining eyes, or worse still, playing thoughtlessly, unconscious of their doom. They said the Christians had set fire to the city, and many an innocent victim suffered for this foul and groundless slander. The Christians forsooth! oppressed, persecuted, reviled, whose only desire was to live in brotherhood with all men, whose very creed is

peace and good-will on earth. I counted twenty of them, men, women, and children, neighbours with whom I had held kindly fellowship, friends with whom I had broken bread, lying stiff and cold in the Flaminian Way on the morning Paul was led out to die. But there was peace on the dead faces, and the rigid hands were clasped in prayer; and though the lacerated emaciated body, the mere shell, was grovelling there in the dust, the spirit had gone home to God who made it, to the other world of which you have not so much as heard, yet which you too must some day visit, to remain for ever. Do you understand me? not for ages, but *for ever*,—without end!"

"Where is it?" asked Esca, on whom the idea of a spiritual existence, innate from its very organization in every intelligent being, did not now dawn for the first time. "Is it here, or there? below, or above? in the stars, or the elements? I know the world in which I live; I can see it, can hear it, can feel it; but that other world, *where* is it?"

"Where is it?" repeated Calchas, "where are the dearest wishes of your heart, the noblest thoughts of your mind? Where are your loves, your hopes, your affections—above all, your memories?"

Where is the whole better part of your nature; your remorse for evil, your aspirations after good, your speculations on the future, your convictions of the reality of the past? Where these are, *there* is that other world. You cannot see it, you cannot hear it, yet you *know* that it must be. Is any man's happiness complete? is any man's misery when it reaches him so overwhelming as it seemed at a distance? And why is it not? Because something tells him that the present life is but a small segment in the complete circle of a soul's existence. And the circle, you have not lived in Rome without learning, is the symbol of infinity."

Esca pondered and was silent. There are convictions which men hold unconsciously, and to which they are so accustomed that their attention can only be directed to them from without, just as they wear their skins and scarcely know it, till the familiar covering has been lacerated by injury or disease. At last he looked up with a brightening countenance, and exclaimed, "In that world surely, all men will be free!"

"All men will be *equal*," replied Calchas, "but no mortal or immortal ever can be free. Suppose a being totally divested of all necessity for effort,

all responsibility to his fellows or himself, all participation in the great scheme of which government is the essential condition in its every part, and you suppose one whose own feelings would be an intolerable burden, whose own wishes would be an unendurable torture. Man is made to bear a yoke; but the Captain whom I serve has told me that 'his yoke is easy and his burden is light.' How easy and how light I experience every moment of my life."

"And yet you said but now that death and degradation were the lot of those who bore arms by your side in the ranks," observed the Briton, still intently regarding his companion.

A ray of triumphant courage and exultation flashed up into the old man's face. For an instant Esca recognized the fierce daring of a nature essentially bold, reckless, and defiant; but it faded as it came, and was succeeded by an expression of meek, chastened humility, whilst he replied—

"Death welcome and long-looked for! Degradation that confers the highest honours in this world and the next! At least to those who are held worthy of the great glory of martyrdom. Oh! that I might be esteemed one of that noble

band! But my work will be laid to my hand, and it is enough for me to be the lowest of the low in the service of my Master."

"And that master? Tell me of that master," exclaimed Esca, whose interest was excited, as his feelings were roused, by converse with one who seemed so thoroughly impressed with the truth of what he spoke, who was at once so earnest, so gentle and so brave. The old man bowed his head with unspeakable reverence, but in his face shone the deep and fervent joy of one who looks back with intense love and gratitude to the great epoch of his existence.

"I saw Him once," said he, "on the shore of the Sea of Galilee—I that speak to you now saw Him with my own eyes—there were little children at His feet. But we will talk of this again, for you are weary and exhausted. Meat and drink are even now prepared for you. It is good to refresh the body if the mind is to be vigorous and discerning. You have done for us to-night the act of a true friend. You will henceforth be always welcome in Eleazar's house."

While he spoke, the girl whom Esca had rescued so opportunely, entered the apartment, bearing in some food on a coarse and common

trencher, with a wine-skin, of which she poured the contents into a jewelled cup, and presented it to her preserver with an embarrassed but very graceful gesture, and a soft shy smile.

Marianne had unveiled ; and if Esca's expectations during their homeward walk, had been raised by her gentle feminine manners, and the sweet tones of her voice, they were not now disappointed with what he saw. The dark eyes that looked up so timidly into his own, were full and lustrous as those of a deer. They had, moreover, the mournful, pleading expression peculiar to that animal, and through all their softness and intelligence, betrayed the watchful anxiety of one whose life is passed in constant vicissitudes, and occasional danger. The girl's face was habitually pale, though the warm blood mantled in her cheek as she drooped beneath Esca's gaze of honest admiration, and her regular features were sharpened, a little more than was natural to them, by daily care and apprehension. This was especially apparent in the delicate aquiline of the nose, and a slight prominency of the cheek bones. It was a face that in prosperity would have been rich and sparkling as a jewel, that in adversity preserved its charms from the rare and chastened

beauty in which it was modelled. Her dress betrayed the same incongruity that was so remarkable in the furniture of her home. Like her veil it was black, and of a coarse and common material, but where it was looped up, the folds were fastened by one single gem of considerable value; and two or three links of a heavy gold chain were visible round her white and well-turned neck.

Moving through the room, busied with the arrangements of the meal which she must herself have prepared, Esca could not but observe the pliant grace of her form, enhanced by a certain modest dignity, very different from the vivacious gestures of the Roman maidens to whom he was accustomed, and especially pleasing to the eye of the Briton.

Calchas seemed to love the girl as a daughter; and his kind face grew kinder and gentler still, while he followed her about in her different movements, with eyes of the deepest and fondest affection.

Esca could not but observe that the board was laid for three persons, and that by one of the wooden platters stood a drinking-cup of great beauty and value. Mariamne's glance followed his as it rested

on the spare place. "For my father," said she, gently, in answer to the inquiry she read on his face. "He is later than usual to-night, and, I fear—I fear; my father is so bold, so prompt to draw steel when he is angered. To-night he has left his sword at home; and I know not whether to be most frightened or reassured at his being alone in this wicked town, unarmed."

"He is in God's hand, my child," said Calchas, reverently. "But I should not fear for Eleazar," he added, with a proud and martial air, "were he surrounded by a score of such as we see prowling nightly in the streets of Rome, though they were armed to the teeth, and he with only a shepherd's staff to keep his head."

"Is he then so redoubtable a warrior?" asked Esca, on whom good manhood seldom failed to produce a favourable impression. While he spoke he looked from one to the other with increasing curiosity and interest.

"You shall judge for yourself," answered Calchas, "for it cannot now be long ere he return. Nevertheless, the man who could leap down from the walls of a beleaguered city, as my brother did naked and unarmed—who could break the head off a Roman battering-ram by main

force, and render that engine useless—who could reach the wall again with his prize, covered with wounds, having fought his way through a whole maniple of Roman soldiers, and could ask but for a draught of water, ere he donned his armour, and took his place once more upon the rampart—is not likely to fear aught that can befall him from a few idlers in a common street-broil. Nevertheless, as I said before, you shall judge for yourself.”

“And here he is!” exclaimed Mariamne, while the outer door shut to, and a man’s step was heard advancing through the adjoining apartment, with a firm and measured footfall.

She had been pale enough all night in the eyes of Esca, who was watching her intently; but he thought now she seemed to turn a shade paler than before.



CHAPTER VIII.

THE JEW.

THE man who entered the apartment with the air of one to whom every nook and corner was familiar, must have been fully threescore years of age, yet his dark eye still glittered with the fire of youth, his thick curling beard and hair, were but slightly sprinkled with gray, and the muscles of his square powerful frame, seemed but to have acquired solidity and consistency with age. His appearance was that of a warrior; toughened, and, as it were, forged into iron, by years of strife, hardship, and unremitting toil.

If something in the line of his aquiline features resembled Calchas, no two faces could have been more different in their character and expression than those of Eleazar and his brother. The

former was all gentleness, kindliness, and peace ; on the latter, fiery passions, deep schemes, continual peril, and contention, had set their indelible marks. The one was that of the spectator, who is seated securely on the cliff, and marks the seething waters below, with interest indeed and sympathy, but with feelings neither of agitation nor alarm ; the other was the strong swimmer, breasting the waves fiercely, and battling with their might, striving for his life inch by inch, and stroke by stroke, conscious of his peril, confident in his strength, and never despairing for an instant of the result.

At times indeed the influence of opposite feelings, softening the one and kindling the other, would bring out the family likeness clear and apparent upon each ; but in repose no two faces could be more dissimilar, no two types of character more utterly at variance than those of the Christian and the Jew.

As Eleazar's warlike figure came into the light, Esca could not but remark with what a glance of mistrust his quick eye took in the presence of a stranger, how the strong fingers closed instinctively round the staff he was in the act of laying down, and the whole form seemed to gather itself

in an instant as though ready for the promptest measures of resistance or attack. Such trifling gestures spoke volumes of the character and habits of the man.

Nevertheless Calchas rapidly explained to his brother the cause of this addition to their supper-party ; and Mariamne, who seemed in considerable awe of her father, busied herself in placing food and wine before him, with even more alacrity than she had shown when serving their guest.

The Jew thanked his new friend for the kindness he had rendered his daughter, with a few brief cordial words, as one brave man expresses his gratitude to another, then fell to on the meat and drink provided, with a voracity that argued well for his physical powers, and denoted a strong constitution and a long fast.

As he took breath after a deep draught of wine in which, though he pledged him not, he challenged his guest to join, Calchas asked his brother how he had sped in the affairs that kept him from home all day.

“Ill,” answered the other, shooting from under his thick eyebrows a penetrating glance at the Briton. “Ill and slowly, yet not so ill but that something has been gained, another step taken in

the direction at which I aim. Yet I have been to-day in high places, have seen those bloated gluttons, and drunkards, who are the ministers of Cæsar's will, have spoken with that spotted panther, Vespasian's scheming agent, forsooth! who thinks he hath the cunning, as he can doubtless boast of the treachery and the gaudy colours of the beast of prey. Let him take care! Weaker hands than mine have ere this strangled a fiercer animal for the worth of his shining skin. Let him beware! Eleazar-Ben-Manahem is a match, and more than a match, for Julius Placidus the Tribune!"

Esca glanced quickly at the speaker, as his ear caught the familiar name. The look was not lost upon his host.

"You know him?" said he, with a fierce smile that showed the strong white teeth gleaming through his bushy beard. "Then you know as cool and well-taught a soldier as ever buckled on a sword. I wish I had a few like him to officer the *Sicarii** at home. But you know also, a man who would not scruple to slay his own father for the worth of the clasp that fastens his gown. I

* "*Sicarii*," or homicides; bands of assassins, regularly organized in Judæa, who made a trade of murder.

have seen him in the field, and I have seen him in the council. He is bold, skilful, and he can be treacherous in both! Where met you him last?" he added, with a searching glance at Esca, while at the same time he desired Mariamne to fill the stranger's cup and his own.

The latter proceeding engrossed the Briton's whole attention. It was with the utmost carelessness that he replied to the question, by relating his interview, that very morning, with the Tribune at Valeria's door. He scarcely marked how precisely the father noted down the name in his tablets, for the daughter's white arm was reaching over his shoulder, so close that it almost touched his cheek.

It was indeed well worth Eleazar's while to obtain information, from whatever source, of any influence that might affect those in authority with whom he was in daily contact at Rome. His position was one which called for courage, tact, skill, and even cunning to a great extent. Charged by the Supreme Council at Jerusalem, then in the last stage of perplexity, and sorely beset by Vespasian and his legions, with a private mission to Vitellius, who much mistrusted the successful general, he represented the hopes and

fears, the temporal and political prosperity, nay, the very existence of the Chosen People. Nor to all appearance could a better instrument have been selected for the purpose. Eleazar, though a bigoted and fanatical Jew of the strictest sect, was a man of keen and powerful intellect, whose obstinacy was open to no conviction, whose perseverance was to be deterred by no obstacle. A distinguished and fearless soldier, he possessed the confidence of the large and fighting portion of the nation, who looked on Roman supremacy with abhorrence, and who clung dearly to the notion of earthly dominion, wrested from the heathen with the sword. His rigid observance of its fasts, its duties, and its ceremonials, had gained him the affections of the priesthood, and the more enthusiastic followers, of that religion in which outward forms were so strictly enjoined and so faithfully observed; while a certain fierce, defiant, and unbending demeanour towards all classes of men, had won for him a character of frankness which did him good service in the schemes of intrigue and dissimulation with which he was continually engaged.

Yet perhaps the man was honest too, as far as his own convictions went. He esteemed all means

lawful for the furtherance of a lawful object. He was one of those who deem it the most contemptible of weakness to shrink from doing evil that good may come. Like Jephthah he would have sacrificed his daughter unflinchingly in performance of a vow ; nay, had Mariamne stood between him and the attainment of his ambition, or even the accomplishment of his revenge, he would have walked ruthlessly over the body of his child.

Versed in the traditions of his family and the history of his nation, he was steeped to the lips in that pride of pedigree which was so essential a feature of the Jewish character : he was convinced that the eventual destiny of his people was to lord it over the whole earth. He possessed more than his share of that haughty self-sufficiency which bade the Pharisee hold aloof from those of lower pretensions and humbler demeanour than himself ; while he had all the fierce courage and energy of the Lion of Judah, so terrible when roused, so difficult to be appeased when victorious. In his secret heart he anticipated the time when Jerusalem should again become a sovereign city, when the Roman eagles should be scared away from Syria, and a hierarchy established once more as the government of the people chosen by Heaven.

That he should be a second Judas Maccabæus, a chief commander of the armies of the faithful in the new order of things, was an ambition naturally enough entertained by the bold and skilful soldier; but to do Eleazar justice, individual aggrandizement had but little share in his schemes, and personal interest never crossed those visions for the future, on which his dark and dangerous enthusiasm so loved to dwell.

It was a delicate matter to intrigue with Vitellius in Rome against the very general who held supreme authority, at least ostensibly, from the Emperor. It was playing a hazardous game, to receive power and instructions from the Council at Jerusalem, and to use or suppress them according to the bearer's own political views and future intentions.

It was no easy task to hold his own against such men as Placidus, in the contest of *finesse*, subtlety, and double-dealing; yet the Jew entered upon his perilous career with a strenuous energy, a cool calculating audacity, that was engraved in the very character of the man.

Another draught of the rich Lebanon wine served to improve their acquaintance, and Eleazar, with considerable tact, drew from the Briton all

the information he could obtain as to the habits and movements of his antagonist the Tribune, while he seemed but to be carrying on the courteous conversation of a host with his guest. Esca's answers, notwithstanding that thoughts and eyes wandered frequently towards Mariamne, were frank and open like his disposition. He too entertained no very cordial liking for Placidus, and experienced towards the Tribune that unconscious antipathy, which the honest man so often feels for the knave.

Calchas, meanwhile, had returned to the perusal of his scroll, on which his brother cast occasional glances of unfeigned contempt, notwithstanding that the reader was the person whom he most loved and respected on earth. Mariamne moving about the apartment, looked covertly on the fair face and stately form of her preserver, approving largely of what she saw: once their eyes met, and the Jewess blushed to her temples for very shame. So the time passed quickly; the night stole on, the Lebanon was nearly finished, and Esca rose to bid his entertainers farewell.

"You have done me a rare service," said Eleazar, feeling in his breast while he spoke, and producing, from under his coarse garment, a jewel

of considerable value—"a service neither thanks nor guerdon can requite; yet I pray you, keep this trinket in remembrance of the Jew and the Jew's daughter, who come of a people that forgive not an injury, and forget not a benefit."

The colour mounted to Esca's forehead, and an expression of pain, almost of anger, came into his face, while he replied :

"I have done nothing to merit either thanks or reward. It is no such matter to put a fat eunuch on his back, or to defend an unprotected woman in a town like this. Take back your jewel, I pray you. Any other man would have done as much."

"It is not every man who could have interposed so effectually," replied Eleazar, with a glance of hearty approval at the thewes and sinews of his friend, replacing the jewel meanwhile in his vestment, without the least signs of displeasure at its being declined. He would have bestowed it freely, no doubt, but if Esca did not want it, it would serve some other purpose: precious stones and gold would always fetch their value at Rome. "At least you will let me give you a safe-conduct home," he added; "the night is far advanced, and I should be loth that you

should suffer wrong for your interposition in our behalf."

Esca burst out laughing now. In the pride of his strength, it seemed so impossible that he should require protection or assistance from any one. He squared his large shoulders and drew himself to his full height.

"I should wish no better pastime," said he, "than a bout with a dozen of them! I too was brought up a warrior, in a land you have never heard of, many a long mile from Rome; a land fairer far than this, of green valleys and wooded hills, and noble rivers winding calmly towards the sea; a land where the oaks are lofty and the flowers are sweet, where the men are strong and the women fair. I have followed the chase afoot from sunrise to sunset through many a summer's day. I have fronted the invader, sword in hand, ever since my arm was long enough to draw blade from sheath, or I had not been here now. You too are a soldier, I see it in your eye—you can believe that my limbs grow stiff, my spirits droop for lack of martial exercise. In faith, it seems to me that even a vulgar broil in the street makes my blood dance in my veins once more!"

Mariamne was listening with parted lips and

shining eyes. She drank in all he said of his distant home with its woodland scenery, its forest trees, its fragrant flowers, and above all its lovely women. She felt so kindly towards this bold young stranger, exiled from kin and country, she attributed her interest to pity and gratitude, nor could she help wondering to find these sentiments so strong.

Calchas looked up from his studies. "Fare thee well!" said he. "Take an old man's warning, and strike not unless it be in self-defence. Mark well the turning from the main street to the Tiber, so shalt thou find thy way to our poor home again."

Esca promised faithfully to return, and fully intended to redeem his promise.

"Another cup of wine," said Eleazar, emptying the leathern bottle into a golden vessel; "the sun of Italy cannot ripen such a vintage as this."

But the rich produce of the Lebanon was all too cloying for the healthy palate and the thirst of youth. Esca prayed for a draught of fair water, and Mariamne brought him the pitcher and gave him to drink with her own hand.

For the second time to-night their eyes met, and although they were instantly averted, the

Briton felt that he was drinking from a cup more intoxicating than all the wine-presses of Syria could produce,—a cup that made him unconscious of the past as of the future, and only too keenly sensible of the present by its joy. He forgot that he was a barbarian, he forgot that he was a slave. He forgot everything but Mariamne and her dark imploring trustful eyes.



CHAPTER IX.

THE ROMAN.



IT is time to give some account of Esca's anomalous position in the capital of the world. To explain how the young British noble (for that was indeed the rank he held in his own country) found himself a slave in the streets of Rome. In order to do so it is necessary to take a glimpse at the interior of a patrician's house about the hour of supper; perhaps also to intrude upon the reflections of its owner, as he paces up and down the colonnade in the cool air of sunset, absorbed in his own thoughts, and deep in the memories of the past.

His mansion is of stately proportion, and large size, but all its ornaments and accessories are chastened by a severe simplicity of taste. An

observer might identify the man by the very nature of the objects that surround him. In his vestibule the columns are of the Ionic order, and their elaborate capitals have been wrought into the utmost degree of finish which that style will allow. In the smaller entrance-hall or lobby, which leads to the principal apartments, and which is guarded by an image of a dog, let into the pavement in mosaic, there are no florid sculpture, nor carvings, nor any attempt at decoration beyond the actual beauty of the stonework, and the scrupulous care with which it is kept clean. The doors themselves are of bronze, so well burnished as to need no mixture of gold or silver inlaid to enhance its brightness; whilst in the principal hall itself, the room in which friends are welcomed, clients received, and business transacted, the walls, instead of frescoes and such gaudy ornaments, are simply overlaid with entablatures of white and polished marble. The dome is very lofty, rising majestically towards the circular opening at the top, through which the sky is visible; and round the fountain or cistern immediately below this are ranged four colossal statues, representing the Elements. These, with the busts of a long line of illustrious

ancestors, are the only efforts of the sculptor's art throughout the apartment. A large banquetting-hall, somewhat more luxuriously furnished, opens from one side of the central room, and as much as can be seen of it displays considerable attention to convenience and personal comfort. Frescoes, representing scenes of military life, adorn the walls, and at one end stands a trophy, composed of deadly weapons and defensive armour, arranged so as to form a glittering and conspicuous ornament. Large flagons and chalices of burnished gold, some of them adorned with valuable jewels, are ranged upon a side-board; but it is evident that no guests are expected to-night, for near the couch against the wall has been drawn a small table, laid for one person only, with a clean napkin, and a cup and platter of plain silver thereon. That person is none other than the master of the house, bodily pacing up and down his own colonnade in Rome, mentally gazing on a fair expanse of wood and vale and shining river, drinking in the cool breezes, the fragrant odours, and the wild luxuriant beauty of distant Britain.

Five-and-twenty years! and yet it seems but yesterday. The brow wrinkles, the hair turns

grey, strength wastes, energy fails, the brain gets torpid, and the senses dull, but the heart never grows old. Business, ambition, pleasure, dangers, duties, difficulties, and successes have filled that quarter of a century, and passed away like a dream; but the touch of a hand, the memory of a face, have outlived them all. Caius Lucius Licinius, Roman patrician, General, Prætor, Consul, and Procurator of the Empire, is the young commander of a legion once more, with the world before him, and the woman he loves by his side. This is what he sees now, as he has seen it so often in his dreams by night, and his waking visions by day.

An old oak tree, a mossy sward, soft and level as velvet, delicate fern bending and whispering in the summer breeze, fleecy clouds drifting across the blue sky, and a graceful form, in its white robes, coming shyly up the glade, with faltering step, and sidelong glance, and timid gesture, to keep her tryst with her Roman lover. She is in his arms now. The rich brown curls are scattered over his breastplate, and the blue eyes are looking up into his own, liquid with the love-light that thrills to a man's heart but from one pair of eyes in a life-time.

She is, indeed, no contemptible prize, in the glory of her beauty and the pride of her blooming womanhood. With the rounded form, the noble features, and the dazzling colour of her nation, she possesses the courage and constancy of a high-born race, and a witchery half imperious, half playful, peculiarly her own. There are women who find their way to the core of a man's heart, who pervade it all, and saturate it, so to speak, with their influence.

*"Testa semel imbuta diu servabit odorem."**

The vessel that has once held this rich and rare liquid is ever after impregnated with its fragrance, and even when it has been spilt every drop, and a fresh infusion poured in, the new wine smacks strangely and wildly of the old. She is one of them ; he knows it too well.

They should have nothing in common these two, the British chieftain's daughter and the Roman conqueror. But there is a truce between the nations ; a truce in which the elements of discord are nevertheless smouldering, ready to blaze out afresh at the first opportunity, and they

* "You may break, you may ruin the vase if you will,
But the scent of the roses will hang round it still."

have seen each other accidentally, and been thrown together by circumstances, till curiosity has become interest, and interest grown into liking, and liking ripened into love. The British maiden might not be won lightly, and many a tear she wept in secret, and sore she strove against her own heart; but when it conquered her at last she gave it, as such women will, wholly and unreservedly. She would have lived for him, died for him, followed him to the end of the world.

And Licinius worshipped her as a man worships the one woman who is the destiny of his life. Most men have at some time or other experienced this folly, infatuation, madness, call it what you will. They are not likely to forget it. Possibly, alas probably, the bud they then watched opening has never expanded into bloom, at least, for *them*. The worm may have destroyed it, or the cold wind cut it to the earth, or another's hand may have borne it away in triumph to gladden another's breast; but there is something in the May mornings that reminds them of the sweet flower still, and they wander round the fairest gardens of earth rather drearily to-day, because of the memory that has never faded, and the blank where She is not.

Licinius holds the British maiden to his breast, and they discourse of their own happiness and revel in the sunny hour, and plan schemes for the future,—schemes in which each is to the other all in all, and dream not that when to-day is past for them there will be no to-morrow. The woman, indeed, heaves a gentle sigh at intervals, as though in the midst of her happiness some foreboding warned her of the brooding tempest; but the man is hopeful, buoyant, and impetuous, playful in his tenderness, and joyous in his own triumphant love.

They parted that evening more reluctantly than usual. They lingered round the oak, they found excuse after excuse for another loving word, another fond caress. When at last they went their several ways, how often Licinius turned to look after the receding form that carried with it all his hope and all his happiness! Little did he think how, and when, and where he would see Guenebra again.

Ten years went heavily by. The commander of a legion was the chief of an army now. Licinius had served Rome in Gaul, in Spain, in Syria. Men said he bore a charmed life; and, indeed, while his counsels showed the forethought,

the caution, and the patience of a skilful officer, his personal conduct was remarkable for a reckless disregard of danger, which would have been esteemed foolhardy in the meanest soldier. It was observed, too, that a deep and abiding melancholy had taken possession of the once light-hearted patrician. He only seemed to brighten up into his former self under the pressure of imminent danger, in the confusion of a repulse, or the excitement of a charge. At other times he was silent, depressed, preoccupied ; never morose, for his kindly heart was open to the griefs of others, and the legionaries knew that their daring general was the friend of all who were in sorrow or distress. But the men talked him over, too, by their watch-fires ; they marvelled, those honest old campaigners, how one, who was so ready in the field, could be so sparing of the wine-cup ; how the leader, who could stoop to fill his helmet from the running stream under a storm of javelins, and drink composedly with a jest and a smile, should be so backward in the revel, should show such a disinclination to those material pleasures which they esteemed the keenest joys of life.

One old centurion, who had followed his

fortunes from the Thames to the Euphrates, from the confines of Pannonia to the Pillars of Hercules, averred that he had never seen his chief discomfited but once, and that was on the day when he had been accorded a triumph for his services in the streets of Rome. The veteran used to swear he never could forget the dejected look upon those brows, encircled with their laurel garland, nor the weary listlessness of that figure, to which all eyes were directed in its gilded chariot; the object of admiration to the whole city, and, for that day, scarcely second even to Cæsar himself. It was a goodly triumph, no doubt; the spoils were rich, the car was lofty, the people shouted, and the victims fell, but what was glory without Guenebra? and the hero's eye could not rest in peace on one of all those gazing thousands for lack of the loving face, framed in its rich brown hair.

On the very night Licinius and Guenebra parted, a long meditated rising had broken out among the Islanders,—conquered but not subdued. Nothing but the cool courage of its young commander, and the immovable discipline of the legionaries saved the Roman camp. Ere morning, Guenebra had been forced away by her

tribe many miles from the scene of action, the Britons too retired into their strongholds, those natural fastnesses impregnable by regular troops. The whole country was once more in a state of open warfare. Prompt and decisive measures were taken: Publius Ostorius, the Roman general, in execution of a manœuvre, by which he preserved his line of operation, despatched Licinius and his legion to a different part of the island, and with all his exertions and all his influence, the young officer could never obtain tidings of Guenebra again. It was after this event that the change came over Licinius which was so commented on by the soldiers under his command.

Ten years of brilliant and successful services had elapsed when he returned to Britain. Nero had but lately succeeded to the Purple, nor had he then degenerated into the monster of iniquity which he afterwards became. Until sapped by his ungovernable passions, the Emperor's administrative abilities were of no mean order; and he selected Licinius for the important post assigned to him, as being a consummate soldier, and experienced in the country with which he had to deal. The latter accepted the appointment with alacrity: through all change of time and fortune,

he had never forgotten his British love. Under the burning skies of Syria, by the frozen shores of the Danube, at home or abroad, in peace or war, Guenebra's face was ever present to him, fond and trustful as when last they parted under the old oak-tree. He longed but to see it once more. And so he did. Thus:—

A partial insurrection had been quelled beyond the Trent. The Roman vanguard had surprised the Britons, and forced them to fly in great confusion, leaving their baggage, their valuables, in some cases even their arms behind. When Licinius came up with the main body of his forces, he found indeed no prisoners taken, for everything animate had fled, but a goodly amount of spoil, over which Roman discipline had placed a strong guard. One of his tribunes approached him with a list of the captured articles; and when his general had perused it, the officer hesitated as though there was still some further report to make. At last he spoke out:

“There is a hut left standing within the lines of the enemy. I would not order it to be destroyed till I had provided for the burial of a dead body that lies beneath its shelter.”

Licinius was counting the arms taken. “A

dead body," said he, carelessly; "is it an officer of rank?"

"'Tis a woman's corpse," answered the Tribune. "A fair and stately woman. Apparently the wife of some prince or chieftain at the least."

For Guenebra's sake, every woman, much more every British woman, was an object of respect and interest to Licinius.

"Lead on," said he. "I will give directions when I have seen it;" and the General followed his officer to the place already indicated.

It was but a rude hut made of a few planks and branches hastily thrown together. It seemed to have been erected at a moment's notice, probably to shelter an inmate in the last stage of dissolution. Through a wide rent in the roof the summer sun streamed in brilliantly, throwing a sheet of light on the dead face below.

The prostrate form was swathed in its white robe, the bridal garment of the destroyer. A band of white encircled the head and chin, and the brown hair was parted modestly on the smooth forehead calm and womanly as of old. It was Guenebra's face that lay there so strangely still. Guenebra's face, how like and yet how changed! As he stooped over it, and looked on

the closed eyes beneath their arching brows, the fair and noble features chiselled by the hand of death,—the sweet lips wreathed even now, with a chastened loving smile,—he could not but mark that there were lines of thought upon the forehead, streaks of silver in the hair, the result it might be of regrets, and memories, and sorrows, and care for him.

Then the warm tears gushed up into the soldier's eyes, the pressure on his heart and brain seemed to be relieved. As when the spear is drawn out of a wound and the red stream spouts freely forth, the previous agony was succeeded by a dull hopeless resignation, that in comparison seemed almost akin to peace.

He pressed his lips hard upon the cold dead forehead, and turned away—a man for whom from henceforth there was neither good to covet, nor evil to be feared.

And thus it was that here, on earth, Licinius looked once more upon his love.

Fresh victories crowned his arms in Britain—a fresh triumph awaited his return to Rome; but still as of old with Licinius, the glory seemed to count for nothing, the service seemed to be all-in-all. Only now, the restless, eager look had

left his face. He was always calm and unmoved, even in the uncertainty of conflict or the triumph of success. Still kindly in his actions, his outward demeanour was very stern and cold. He kept aloof from the intrigues, as from the pleasures of the court; but was ever ready to serve Rome with his sword, and on many occasions by his coolness and conduct redeemed the errors and incapacity of his colleagues or predecessors. Fortune smiled upon the man who was insensible to her frowns. Honours poured in on the soldier who seemed so careless of their attainment; and Caius Lucius Licinius was perhaps the object of more respect and less envy than any other person of his rank in Rome.

It fell out that shortly before the death of Nero, the General, in traversing the slave-market on the way from the Forum, felt his sleeve plucked by a notorious dealer in human wares, named Gargilianus, who begged him earnestly to come and examine a fresh importation of captives lately arrived from Britain. To mention their country was at once to excite the interest of Licinius, who readily acceded to the request, and spoke a few kind words in their native language to the unhappy barbarians as he passed

through their ranks. His attention was, however, especially arrested by the appearance of one of the conquered, a fine young man of great strength and stature, who seemed to feel painfully the indignity of his position, placed as he was on a huge stone block, whereon his own towering height rendered him a conspicuous object in the throng. He had been severely wounded too in several places, as was apparent from the scars scarce yet healed over. Indeed had it not been so, he would never probably have been here.

There was something in his face, and the expression of his large blue eyes, that roused a painful thrill in the Roman general's breast. He felt a strange and indefinable attraction towards the captive, for which he could not account, and pausing in his walk, scanned him with a wistful searching gaze, which was not lost on the practised perceptions of the dealer.

"He should have been shown in private," whispered Gargilianus, with an important and mysterious air. "Indeed, my man was just taking him away, when I saw you coming, my honoured patron, and I called to him to stop. Ay! you may examine him all over,—tall, young, and healthy. Sound, wind and limb, and stronger

than any gladiator in the amphitheatre. They are men of iron, these barbarians, that's the truth, and he has only just come over. There! look for yourself, noble General, you will see the chalk-marks* on his feet."

"But he is badly wounded," observed Licinius, beginning to scan him, as the other instinctively felt, with the eye of a purchaser.

"That is nothing!" exclaimed Gargiliannus. "Mere scratches, skin-deep, and healed over now. You will not be able to run your nail against them in a week. Eye-sores, I grant you, to-day, otherwise I would ask two thousand sesterces at least for him. These Islanders are cheap at any price."

"I will give you a thousand," said Licinius, quietly.

"Impossible!" burst out the dealer, with a quiver of his fingers, that expressed a most emphatic negative. "I should lose money by him, generous patron! What! A man must live. Cæsar would give more for him to die in the circus. Look at his muscles! He would stand up for a good five minutes against the tiger!"

* According to Pliny, the distinguishing sign of newly-arrived slaves.

This last consideration was probably not without its influence. After a little more haggling, the British captive became the property of Licinius at the cost of fifteen hundred sesterces;* and Esca found the most indulgent and the kindest-hearted master in Rome.

We must return to that master, pacing thoughtfully up and down the colonnade, in the cool and pleasant evening air.

It is perhaps one of the most consoling and merciful dispensations of Providence, that the human mind is so constituted as to dwell on past pleasures, rather than past pain. The sorrow that is done with, returns indeed at intervals vividly and bitterly enough; but every fresh recurrence is less cruel than the last, and we can look back to our sufferings at length, with a calm and chastened humility which is the first step towards resignation and eventual peace. But the memory of a great happiness seems so interwoven with the imperishable part of our being, that it loses none of its reality by the lapse of time, none of its brightness from the effect of distance. Anger, sorrow, hatred, contentions, fleet away like a dream; but the smile that gladdened us long ago, has passed into the

* About twelve pounds sterling.

very sunlight of noon-day; the whisper that softened our sternest moods, steals with the breeze of evening to our heart, gently and tenderly as of yore, and we know, we feel, that while crime, and misery, and remorse, are the temporary afflictions of humanity, pardon, and hope, and love are its inheritance for evermore.

Licinius, pacing his long shadowy colonnade, dwells not on the anxieties, and the separation, and the sorrows of years; not on the loss of his dearest treasure and its possession by another; not even on the calm dead face bound with its linen band. No; he is back in Britain once more with his living love, in the green glade where the bending ferns are whispering under the old oak-tree.

A step in the hall rouses him from his meditations, and a kind grave smile steals over the General's face at the approach of his favourite slave.

The Roman patrician looks what he is—a war-worn veteran, bronzed and hardened by the influence of many campaigns in many climates. He is not yet past the prime of his bodily vigour, and there is a severe beauty about his noble features, and the beard and hair already touched

with grey, that possesses considerable attraction still. Valeria, no mean judge, asserts that he is, and always will be, a handsome man, but that he does not know it. She respects him much, likes him a good deal, and he is the only person on earth for whose good opinion she has the slightest value. In truth, though she would not confess it even to herself, she is a little afraid of her good-hearted, brave, and thoughtful kinsman.

A man who has reached mature age without forming family ties is always to a certain extent in a false position. No amount of public interest will stop up the little chinks and corners, so to speak, which are intended by Nature to contain the petty cares and pleasures and vexations of domestic life. Without the constant association—the daily friction—of wife and children, a cynical disposition becomes selfish and morose—a kind one, melancholy and forlorn.

Licinius feels a blank in his existence, which nothing he has yet found serves to fill; and he often wonders in himself why the barbarian slave should be almost the only creature in Rome for whom he entertains a feeling of interest and regard.

As he takes his place on the couch by the

supper-table, Esca gives him to drink; and the patrician cannot help thinking the while, how he would like to have such a son, tall and handsome, with so warlike an air,—a son whom he could instruct in all the intricacies of his glorious profession, whose mind he could educate, whose genius he could foster, and whose happiness he could watch over and insure.

They converse freely enough during the General's temperate meal,—an egg, a morsel of kid, a few grapes, and a flask of common Sabine wine. Esca tells his master the encounter of the previous evening, and the friendship he had made in consequence after nightfall. Licinius laughs at his account of the skirmish, and the eunuch's discomfiture.

“Nevertheless,” says he, “I trust he did not recognise you. It can have been none other than Spado, whom you treated so unceremoniously; and Spado is just now a prime favourite with Cæsar. I might find it difficult to protect you if he knew where to find you, for charms and philtres are deadlier weapons in such hands as his, than sword and spear in yours and mine. Did he take note of your person think you, Esca, ere he went down?”

"I can hardly believe it," answered Esca. "The evening was dark, and the confusion great. Moreover, I fled with the poor girl they had surrounded, the very instant I could snatch her out of the throng."

"And you saw these Jews in their home, you say?" pursued Licinius, gravely. "I have heard much of that people, and, indeed, served against them in Syria. Are they not morose, cruel, blood-thirsty? Slayers of men, devourers of children? Have they not fearful orgies in which they feast upon human flesh? And one day in the week that they devote to solitude and silence, and schemes of hatred against all mankind? Are you sure that your entertainers belonged to this detestable nation?"

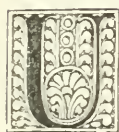
"Christians and Jews," replied Esca, who had caught the sound of the former title in the course of his conversation with Calchas.

"Are they not the same?" returned Licinius; and to this question the barbarian was unable to furnish a reply.



CHAPTER X.

A TRIBUNE OF THE LEGIONS.



UNDER the porch of one of the most luxurious houses in Rome, two men jostled in the dubious light of early morning. Exclamations of impatience were succeeded by a mutual recognition, and a hearty laugh, as Damasippus and Oarses, freed-men and staunch clients of Julius Placidus, recognized each other's eagerness to pay court to their joint patron. They had risen from their beds while it was yet dark, and hurried hither in order to be the first to salute the Tribune at his morning levée. Yet they found the great hall filling already with a bustling crowd of friends, retainers, clients, and dependants. Damasippus was a short, square, beetle-browed man, with a villanous leer. Oarses, a pale, sedate, and some-

what precise personage. But with this marked difference of exterior, an expression of unscrupulous and thorough-paced knavery was common to both. Said Damasippus to Oarses, with a shrug of affected disgust—

“It may be hours yet ere he will see us ! Look at this wretched crowd of parasites and flatterers ! They will follow the patron to his bath ! They will besiege him in his very bed ! Oh, my friend ! Rome is no longer the place for an honest man.”

To which Oarses replied, in subdued and humble tones—

“The flies gather round the honey, though it is only for what they can get. But the sincerest gratitude and affection draw you and me, my dear companion, to the side of the illustrious Tribune.”

“You speak truth,” returned Damasippus. “It is sad to see how few clients are uninfluenced by mean and sordid thoughts. An honest man is becoming as rare at Rome as at Athens. It was not so in the days of the republic—in the golden age—in the good old times !”

“Oh, for the good old times !” exclaimed Oarses, still in the same low and unmoved voice.

“Oh, for the good old times !” echoed Damasippus ; and the two knaves, with their arms on

each other's shoulders, fell to pacing the extremity of the hall, and exchanging spiteful remarks on the concourse with which it was filled.

The Tribune's house was the most perfect of its kind in the whole city. Standing apart and surrounded by a wall and garden of its own, it combined the luxurious splendour of a palace with the comfort and seclusion of a private residence. Everything of ornament that was most costly and gorgeous, had been procured by Placidus to decorate his mansion. Everything of art that was most conspicuous and effective hung on his walls, stood in picturesque groups about his apartments, or lay scattered in rich profusion on his floor. The hangings that veiled his own sleeping room from the public eye, were of embroidered crimson silk, woven in the looms of Asia, and probably taken by the strong hand of the successful soldier as spoils of war. The very pavement of the hall was of the richest mosaic, traced in fanciful patterns and inlaid with gold.

As the morning drew on, it was trodden by a multitude of feet. No one of his rank held so numerous a levée as Julius Placidus. In the concourse that thronged it now, might be seen men of all countries, classes, characters, professions

and denominations. Unlike Licinius, who, indeed, owed his influence solely to the firm consistency and unbending rectitude of his character, the Tribune let no opportunity pass of binding an additional partizan to his cause by the ties of self-interest and expectation. They were crowding in now through the wide open doors; and while the spacious hall was nearly filled, the approach to it, and the street itself outside, were choked with applicants, who had one and all, directly or indirectly, something to get, or ask, or hope for, from the Tribune. Here, an artist brought his picture carefully draped in the remains of an old garment; yet not so entirely concealed, but that a varnished corner might be visible, and the painter, nothing loth, might be prevailed on by earnest solicitations to reveal, bit by bit, all the beauties of his production. There, a sculptor was diligently preserving the outlines of his model, wrapped in its wet cloth, from collision with the bystanders, and assuming credit for the mysterious beauties of a work, which, perhaps, if uncovered, would have grievously disappointed the eyes that scanned it so curiously. In one corner stood a jeweller, holding in his hand a gorgeous collar of pearls and rubies, prepared by the patrician's orders, and

testifying at once to the ingenuity of the tradesman, and the munificence of his employer. In another, waited a common-looking slave, with a down-cast eye and a bloated unwholesome face; who, nevertheless, assumed an important air that seemed to say, he was sure of an early audience, as, indeed, was more than probable in consideration of his tidings, a message from venal beauty to the admirer who paid his welcome tribute in gold. Parasites and flatterers elbowed their way insolently in the midst, as though they had a right to be there, whilst honest men, brown with toil, and sighing wistfully for the fresh breezes of Tibur or Præneste, kept aloof, abashed and shrinking, though they had but come to ask for their due. Nearest the hangings that concealed the bed-room, stood a dirty slave, bespattered with the filth of the fish-market, and exhaling an odour of garlick that cleared for him an ample breathing-space even in a Roman crowd; but the knave knew the value of his intelligence, and how it would obtain him favour in the Tribune's eyes. No less important a communication than this, that a mullet had been taken the night before of nearly six pounds weight, and that so lavish a patron as Placidus, should have the first offer to purchase at

a thousand sesterces* a pound. He waited with his eyes intently fastened on the curtains, and took no notice of the jabber and confusion that pervaded the hall.

Presently the crowd gave way a little, ebbing backward on either side, and forming a lane as it were for three men, who were regarded as they passed, with glances of great awe and admiration. There was no mistaking the deep chest and broad shoulders of one of these, even apart from the loud frank voice in which Hirpinus the Gladiator was wont to convey his observations, without much respect for persons. He was accompanied, on the present occasion, by two individuals, obviously of the same profession as himself—Hippias the fencing-master, and Euchenor the boxer. All three conversed and laughed boisterously. It was obvious, that, even at that early hour, they had not broken their fast without a generous draught of wine. “Talk not to me,” said Hirpinus, rolling his strong shoulders, and observing with great complacency the attention he excited—“Talk not to me, I have seen them all—Dacians,

* The *sestercius* was at this period about one penny three farthings, or rather more. The *sestertium*, or thousand sesterces, about 7*l.* 1*6s.*

Gauls, Cimbrians, Ethiopians, every barbarian that ever put on a breastplate. By Hercules, they were fools to this lad. Why, the big yellow-haired German, whom Cæsar gave us for the lion last summer, would not have stood up to him for a quarter of an hour. He was taller, maybe, a little, but he hadn't the shape, man—he hadn't the shape! You'll hardly call *me* a kid that hasn't put his horns out, will ye? Well, he gave me so much to do with the cestus, that I wouldn't have taken it off for a flagon of cheap wine, I tell ye. What think ye of *that*, my little Greek? You don't call it so bad for a beginner, I hope?"

He turned to Euchenor as he spoke, a beautifully-made young man, of extraordinary strength and symmetry, with the regular chiselled features of his country, and as evil an expression as ever lowered on a fair face.

The Greek pondered awhile before he answered. Then he made the apposite inquiry:—

"Were you sober, Hirpinus, when you stood up to him? or had you sucked down a skinful of wine, before you took your bellyful of boxing?"

The other burst into a loud laugh. "Drunk or sober," said he, "*You* know the stuff I am made of, just as well as *I* know your weight to an

ounce, and your reach to an inch. Ay, and your mettle too, my lad! though it don't take a six-foot rod to get to the bottom of *that*. Hark'ye, this Briton of mine would *eat* such a man as you, body and bones and all, just as I would eat a thrush, and be ready for another directly, without so much as washing his mouth out."

A very sinister scowl passed across Euchenor's face, who did not quite relish this low valuation of his prowess, and, above all, his courage; but he was a professional boxer, and, as such, necessarily possessed thorough command of temper, so he only glanced a little scornfully over the other's frame, which was getting somewhat into flesh, and observed,—

"There will be money to be made out of him then in the arena, if he falls into good hands, and is properly trained."

Hitherto, the fencing-master had joined but carelessly in the conversation, and, indeed, scarcely seemed aware of its purport; but the concluding sentence arrested his attention, and turning upon Hirpinus rather angrily, and with the air of one accustomed to command, he said, abruptly,—

"Why did you not bring him to me at once?"

If you have let him slip through those great fingers of yours, it will be the worst job you have been concerned in for many a day. Have a care, Hirpinus! Better men than you have been under the net ere now, and the great games are not so far off. It needs but a word from me to send you into the arena to-morrow, a fair prey for a clumsy trident, and a fathom or two of twine. You know that as well as I do."

Hippias spoke truth. A retired gladiator, celebrated for his deadly swordmanship and the number of his victories, he had been long ago invested by Nero with the wooden foil, which represented a free discharge and immunity from future services in the amphitheatre. Habituated, however, to the excitement of the fatal sport, and rejoicing in that spurious fame which so distinguished men of his class at Rome, he had set up a school for the express purpose of training swordsmen for the arena; and had won such favour, under two successive emperors, by the proficiency to which he brought his pupils, and his talent for arranging the deadly pageants in which they figured, that he had gradually become an incontrovertible authority on such matters, and the principal manager of the games in the amphitheatre. Of

his reputation for gallantry, and the strange fascination such men possessed for the Roman ladies, we have already spoken ; but if his smiles were courted amongst the fair spectators of their contests, his word was law with the gladiators themselves. He it was who paired the combatants, supplied them with weapons, adjusted their disputes, and, in most cases, held the balance on which their very lives depended. A threat from Hippias, was more dreaded by these ruffians, than the home-thrust of spear and sword.

Now, Hirpinus, although a fearless and skilful fighter, had his assailable point. On one occasion, when he had entered the circus as a *secutor*, that is to say, a combatant armed with sword and helmet, against the *retiarius*, who bore nothing but a trident and net, he had the misfortune to find himself involved in the meshes of the latter, and at the mercy of his antagonist. The Roman crowd, though fickle in its approval, and uncertain in its antipathies, spared him in consideration of the gallant fight he had made ; but Hirpinus, never forgot his sensations at that moment. Bold and fierce as he was, it completely *cowed* him ; and the boisterous, boastful prizefighter would turn pale at the mention of a

trident and a net. There was something ludicrous in the manner in which he now quailed before Hippias, eyeing him with the same sort of imploring glance that a dog casts at his master, and obviously persuaded of the speedy fulfilment of his threat.

“Patience, patron!” he growled, apologetically. “I know where the lad is to be found. I can lay my hand on him at any time. I can bring him with me to the School. Why I talked myself well-nigh hoarse, and stayed out the drinking of two flagons of sour Sabine to boot, while I canvassed him to become one of *us*, and join the family forthwith. Why, you don’t think, patron, I would be so thick-witted as to let him go without finding out where he lives? He is either a freedman, or a slave of ——”

“Hush, fool?” interrupted Hippias, angrily, observing that Damasippus and Oarses were hovering near, and listening intently for a piece of intelligence which he had resolved should be conveyed by himself, and none other, to the Tribune’s ear. “There is no occasion to publish it by the crier. Hadst thou but brains, man, in any sort of proportion to those great muscles of thine, I could tell thee why, with some hope

of being understood. Enough ! lose not sight of the lad ; and, above all, keep thy tongue within thy teeth !”

The big gladiator nodded a sulky affirmative, puzzled, but obedient ; and the two freedmen, with many courteous bows and gestures, accosted the champions with all the humility and deference to which such public characters were entitled.

“They say there will be two hundred pairs of swordsmen, matched at the same moment,” observed Damasippus, in allusion to the coming games ; “and not a plate of steel allowed in the circus, save sword and helmet. But of course, my Hippias, *you* know best if this is true.”

“And three new lions from Libya, loose at once,” added Oarses, “with a scene representing shepherds surprised over their watch-fires ; real rocks, I have been told, and a stream of running water in the amphitheatre, with a thicket of live shrubs, from which the beasts are to emerge. *Your* taste, illustrious Hippias, the people say, is perfect. It has obviously been consulted here.”

Hippias smiled mysteriously, and a little scornfully.

“There *is* a lion from Libya,” said he ; “I can

tell you thus much. I, myself, saw him fed only yesterday, at sunset."

"Is he large? is he strong? is he fierce?" questioned the two, almost in a breath. "When did he come? is he quite full-grown? will they keep him without flesh? Of course the shepherds are not to be armed? Will they be condemned criminals, or only paid gladiators? Not that it matters much, if the lion is a pretty good one. We had a tiger, you know, last year, that killed five Ethiopian slaves, though they all set on him at once."

"But they were unarmed," interrupted Euchenor, whose cheek had turned a shade paler during the discussion. "Give me the proper weapons, and I fear no beast that walks the earth."

"Unarmed, of course!" repeated Damasippus, "and so was the tiger. A more beautiful creature was never seen. Do you not remember, Oarses, how he waved his long tail and stroked his face with his paws, like a kitten before it begins to play? And then, when he made his spring, the first black was rolled up like a ball? I was in the fifth row, my friends, yet I heard his bones crack, distinctly, even there."

"He was a great loss that tiger," observed

Oarses, more sadly than usual; "they should never have pitted him against a tusked elephant. The moment I saw the ivory, I knew how the fight must end, and I wagered against the smaller animal directly. I would have lost my sesterces, I think, willingly, for it to have won; but the beautiful beast never had a chance."

"It was the weight that did it, patrons—the weight," observed Hirpinus. "Man or beast, I will explain to you that weight must always—"

But here the Gladiator's dissertation was broken off by the movement of the crimson hangings, and the appearance of Placidus emerging on his levée of expectants, bright and handsome, ready dressed for the day.

The Tribune owned one advantage at least, which is of no small service to a man who embarks on a career demanding constant energy and watchfulness; he possessed that good digestion which is proverbially held to accompany an elastic conscience and a hard heart. Though supper the previous evening had been a luxurious and protracted meal,—though the wine-cup had passed round very often, and the guests with singing brains had shown themselves in their own characters to their cool-headed and

designing host,—the latter, refreshed by a night's rest, now appeared with the glow of health on his cheek, and its lustre in his eye. As he looked about him on the throng of clients and dependants, his snow-white gown fastened and looped up with gold, his mantle adorned with a broad violet hem, his hair and beard carefully perfumed and arranged; a murmur of applause went round the circle which, perhaps, for once was really sincere, and even the rough gladiators could not withhold their approbation from a figure that was at once so richly attired, so manly, and so refined.

“Hail, my friends!” said the Tribune, pausing in the entrance, and looking graciously around him on the crowd.

“Hail, patron!” answered a multitude of voices, in every key from the subdued and polished treble of Oarses, to the deep hoarse bass of the gladiators.

Placidus moved from one to the other, with an easy, though dignified cordiality of manner which he well knew how to assume when disposed to cultivate the favour of his inferiors. Clear-headed and discerning, in a wonderfully short space of time he had despatched the various

matters which constituted the business of his morning levée. He had admired the model, declined the painting, ordered the statue, bought the jewels, answered the fair suppliant's message, and secured the mullet by sending to the market for it at once. The honest countrymen, too, he dismissed sufficiently well-pleased, considering they had received nothing more substantial than smiles; and he now turned leisurely to Hippias, as if life had no duty so engrossing as the pursuit of pleasure, and asked him eagerly after the training of his gladiators, and the prospects of the amphitheatre.

Hippias knew his own value: he conversed with the patrician as an equal; but Hirpinus and Euchenor, appreciating the worth of a rich patron, gazed on Placidus with intense respect and admiration. The latter, especially, watched the Tribune with his bright cunning eye, as if prepared to plant a blow on the first unguarded place.

"But your swordsmen are all too well known," urged the patrician on the fencing-master. "Here is old Hirpinus covers his whole body with two feet of steel as if it were a complete suit of armour, and never takes his point off his adversary's heart the while. The others are nearly as wary;

if they encounter ordinary fencers they are sure to conquer; if we match them against each other and the people would see blood drawn, they must fight blindfolded,* and it becomes a matter of mere chance. No, what we want is a new man; one whom we can train without his being discovered, and bring out as an unknown competitor to try for the Emperor's prize. What say you, Hippias? 'Tis the only chance for a winning game now."

"I have heard of such a one," answered Hippias. "I think I can lay my hand on an untried blade, that a few weeks' training will polish up into the keenest weapon we have sharpened yet; at least, so Hirpinus informs me. What say'st thou, old Trojan? Tell the patron how thou camest to light on thy match at last."

Thus adjured, the veteran gladiator related at considerable length, interrupted by many exclamations of wonder from Damasippus and Oarses, his chance meeting with Esca in the forum, and subsequent trial of strength and skill at the gymnasium. Somewhat verbose, as we have seen, when he could secure an audience, Hirpinus waxed eloquent on so congenial a

* This inhuman practice was actually in vogue.

theme as the beauty and stature of his new friend. "As strong as an ox, patron," said he, "and as lithe as a panther! Hand, and foot, and eye, all keeping time together like a dancing girl's." The spring of a wild-cat, and the light footfall of a deer. Then he would look so well in the arena, with his fair young face, set on his towering neck, like that of the son of Peleus. Indeed, if he should be vanquished, the women would save him every time. Why, one of the fairest and the noblest ladies in Rome, stopped her litter in the crowded street while we walked together, and bade him come and speak to her from sheer good-will. In faith, he was as tall, and twice as handsome as the very Liburnians who carried her on their shoulders."

The Tribune was laughing heartily at the athlete's eloquence; but Damasippus, who never took his eyes off his patron's face, thought the evil laugh was more malicious than usual at the mention of the Liburnians, and there was a false ring in the mirthful tones with which he asked for more information as to this young Apollo, and the dame on whom his appearance seemed to have made such an impression.

"I know most of the great ladies pretty well

by sight," answered the honest swordsman. "Faith, a man does not easily forget the faces he sees turned on him in the arena, when he has his point at his adversary's throat, and they bid him drive it merrily home, and never spare. But of all the faces I see under the awning, there's not one looks down so calm and beautiful on a death-struggle as that of the noble Valeria."

"Like the moon on the torrent of Anio," observed Damasippus.

"Like the stars on the stormy Egean," echoed Oarses.

"Like nothing but herself," continued Hirpinus, who esteemed his own judgment incontrovertible on all matters relating to physical beauty whether male or female. "The handsomest face and the finest form in Rome. It was not likely I could be mistaken, though I only caught a glimpse of her neck and arm for a moment, as she drew back the curtains of her litter, like——" And here Hirpinus paused for a simile, concluding with infinite relish, "like a blade half drawn, and returned with a clash into the sheath."

Again, Damasippus thought he perceived a quiver on his patron's face. Again there was

something jarring in the Tribune's voice, as he said to Hippias—

“We must not let this new Achilles escape us ! See to it, Hippias. Who knows ? He may make a worthy successor, even for thee, thou artist in slaughter, when he has worked his way up step by step, and victory by victory, to the topmost branch of the tree.”

Hippias laughed good-humouredly, turning at the same time his right thumb outward, and pointing with it to the roof. It was the gesture with which the Roman crowd in the amphitheatre refused quarter to the combatant who was down.



CHAPTER XI.

STOLEN WATERS.



THE broken column of one of the buildings destroyed in the great fire of Rome, and not yet restored, was glowing crimson in the setting sun. Beneath its base, the Tiber was gliding gently on towards the sea. There was a subdued hum even in the streets of the imperial city that denoted how the burden and heat of the day were now past ; and the languor of the hour seemed to pervade even those who were compelled to toil on in the struggle for bread, and who could only in imagination abandon themselves to repose. On a fragment of the ruin sat Esca, gazing intently on the water as it stole by. To all appearance his listless and dreamy mood was unconscious of surrounding objects, yet his atti-

tude was that of one prepared to start into action at a moment's notice ; and though his arms were folded and his head bent down, his ear was watching eagerly to catch the faintest sound.

It is a patience-wearing process, that same waiting for a woman ; and under the most favourable circumstances is productive of much irritation, disappointment, and disgust. In the first place a man is invariably too soon, and this knowingly and as it were with malice prepense. Taking time thus by the forelock, delays his flight considerably, and indeed reduces his pace to the slowest possible crawl ; so that when the appointed moment *does* arrive, it seems to the watcher that it has been past a considerable period, and that his vigil should be already over, when in reality it is only just begun. Then, as the minutes steal on, come the different misgivings and suspicions which only arise on such occasions, and which in his right senses the self-torturer would be incapable of harbouring. Circumstances which, when the appointment was made, seemed expressly adapted to further his designs, now change to insurmountable difficulties, or take their place as links in a chain of deception which he persuades himself has been forged with

unheard-of duplicity, expressly for his discomfiture. He thinks badly of every one, worst of all of her, whose unpardonable fault is that she is now some fifty seconds late. Then comes a revulsion of feeling, and his heart leaps to his mouth, for yonder, emerging on the long perspective, is a female figure obviously advancing this way. The expected object is tall, slim, pliant, and walks with the firm free step of a deer on the heather. The advancing shape is short, fat, awkward, and waddles in its gait; nevertheless, it is not till it has reached within arm's length that he will allow himself to be convinced of his disappointment. If its ears are pretty quick, the unoffending figure may well be shocked at the deep and startling execration which its presence calls forth. Then begins another phase of despondency, humiliation, and bitter self-contempt, through all which pleasant changes of feeling the old feverish longing remains as strong as ever. At last she comes round the corner in good earnest, with the well-known smile in her eyes, the well-known greeting on her lips, and he forgets in an instant, as if they had never been, his anxiety, his anger, his reproaches, all but the presence that brings light to his life and gladness to his heart once more.

Esca rose impatiently at intervals, walked a few paces to and fro, sat down again, and threw small fragments of the ruin into the water.

Presently a figure draped in black and closely veiled moved down to the river's side near where the Briton sat, and began filling a pitcher from the stream. It could hardly have passed the column without seeing him, yet did it seem unconscious of his presence ; and who could tell how the heart might be beating within the bosom, or the cheek blushing behind the veil ?”

That veil was lifted, however, with an exclamation of surprise, when Esca stooped over her to take the pitcher from her hand, and Mariamne's cheek turned paler now than it had been even on the memorable night when he rescued her from the grasp of Spado and his fellow-bacchanals.

He too murmured some vague words of astonishment at finding her here. If they were honest, for *whom* could he have been waiting so impatiently ? and it is possible besides, Mariamne might have been a little disappointed had she been allowed to fill her pitcher from the Tiber for herself.

The Jewess had been thinking about him a good deal more than she intended, a good deal

more than she knew for the last two days. It is strange how *very* insensibly such thoughts gain growth and strength without care or culture. There are plants we prune and water every day which never reach more than a sickly and stunted vitality after all, and there are others that we trample down, cut over, tear up by the very roots, which nevertheless attain such vigour and luxuriance that our walls are covered by their tendrils, and our dwellings pervaded by their fragrance.

Mariamne was no bigoted daughter of Judah for whom the stranger was an outcast because a heathen. Her constant intercourse with Calchas had taught her nobler truths than she had derived from the traditions of her fathers. And with all her pride of race and national predilections, she had imbibed those principles of charity and toleration which formed the ground-work of a new religion destined to shed its light upon all the nations of the earth.

It was not precisely as a *brother* though, that Mariamne had yet brought herself to regard the handsome British slave.

They were soon conversing happily together. The embarrassment of meeting had disappeared

with the first affectation of surprise. It was not long before he told her how tired he had been of watching by the broken column at the river-side.

“How could you know I should come here?” asked the girl with a look of infinite simplicity and candour, though she must have remembered all the time, that she had not scrupled to hint at the daily practice in course of conversation with Calchas, on the night when Esca brought her safely home.

“I hoped it,” he replied with a smile. “I have been a hunter, you know, and have learned that the shyest and wildest of animals seek the water-side at sunset. I was here yesterday, and waited two long hours in vain.”

She glanced quickly at him, but withdrew her eyes immediately, while the blood mounted to her pale face.

“Did you expect to see me?” she asked in a trembling voice; “and I never left the house the whole of yesterday! Oh, how I wish I had known it!” then she stopped in painful embarrassment, as having said too much.

He appeared not to notice her confusion. He seemed to have some confession to make on his

own part. Something he hardly dared to tell her, yet which his honest nature could not consent should be withheld. At last he said it with an effort.

“You know what I am! My time is not my own, my very limbs belong to another. It matters not that the master is kind, good, and considerate. Mariamne, I am a slave!”

“I know it,” she answered, very gently, with a loving pity beaming in her dark eyes. “My kinsman Calchas told me as much after you went away.”

He drew a long breath as if relieved. “And yet you wished to see me again?” he asked, while a gleam of happiness brightened his face.

“Why not?” she replied with a kind smile. “Though that hand is a slave’s it struck my enemy down with the force of a hundred warriors; though that arm is a slave’s, it bore me home with the care and tenderness of a woman. Ah! tell me not of slavery when the limbs are strong, and the heart is brave and pure. Though the body be chained with iron fetters, what matter so long as the spirit is free? Esca, you do not believe I think the worse of you because you are a heathen and a slave?”

Her voice was very soft and low while she spoke his name. No voice had ever sounded so sweetly in his ears before. A new, strange sense of happiness seemed to pervade his whole being, yet he had never felt his situation so galling and unendurable as now.

“I would not have you think the worse of me,” he answered, eagerly, “upon any account. Listen, Mariamne: I was taken captive in war and brought here with a hundred others to Rome. We were set up like cattle in the slave-market. Like cattle also we were purchased one by one by those who esteemed themselves practised judges of such human wares. I was bought by Caius Lucius Licinius at the price of a yoke of oxen, or a couple of chariot-horses. Bought and sold like a beast of the field, and driven home to my new master!”

He spoke with a scorn all the more bitter from having been repressed so long. Yet he kept back and smothered the indignation rising within him. This was the first ear that had ever been open to his wrongs, and the temptation was strong to pour them freely forth to so interested and partial a listener. To do him justice he refrained from the indulgence. He had been taught from childhood

that it was weak and womanish to complain ; and the man had not forgotten the lessons of the boy.

Her gentle voice again interposed in soothing and consoling accents.

“But he is kind,” she said, “kind and considerate—you told me so yourself. I could not bear to think him otherwise. Indeed, Esca, it would make me very unhappy to know that you——”

Here she broke off suddenly, and snatched up the pitcher he had been filling for her with such haste as to spill half its contents over his dress and her own. “There is some one watching us ! Farewell !” she whispered in a breathless, frightened voice, and hurried away, turning her head once, however, to cast a glance over her shoulder, and then hastened home faster than before.

Esca looked after her while she continued in sight, either unconscious of their vicinity, or at all events not noticing a pair of bold black eyes that were fixed upon him with an expression of arch and ludicrous surprise. He turned angrily, however, upon the intruder, when the black eyes had gazed their fill, and their owner burst out into a loud, merry, and mocking laugh.



CHAPTER XII.

“MYRRHINA.”



MYRRHINA'S voice was at all times pitched in a high key: her accents were very distinct and shrill, admirably adapted for the expression of derision or the conveyance of sarcastic remarks.

“So I have run you into a corner at last,” she said; “and a pretty hunt you have given me! ’Tis to draw water, of course, that you come down to the Tiber-side just at sunset; and you met her quite by accident I dare say, that slip of a girl in her wisp of black clothes, who flitted away just now like a ghost going back again to Proserpine. Ah! you gape like a calf when they put the garland on him for sacrifice, and the poor thing munches the very flower-buds that deck him for destruction. Well, you at least are reserved for a

nobler altar, and a worthier fate than to give your last gasp to a sorceress in the suburbs. Jupiter ! how you stare, and how handsome you look, you great, strong barbarian, when you are thoroughly surprised !”

She put her face so close up to his, to laugh at him, that the gesture almost amounted to a caress. Myrrhina had no slight inclination to make love to the stalwart Briton on her own account, pending the conclusion of certain negotiations she felt bound to carry out on her mistress's. These were the result of a conversation held that morning while the maid was as usual combing out her lady's long and beautiful hair.

Valeria's sleep had been broken and restless. She tossed and turned upon her pillow, and put back the hair from her fevered cheeks and throbbing temples in vain. It was weary work to lie gazing with eyes wide open at the flickering shadows cast by the night-lamp on the opposite wall. It was still less productive of sleep to shut them tight and abandon herself to the vision thus created, which stood out in life-like colours and refused to be dispelled. Do what she would to forget him, and conjure up some other object,

there was the young barbarian, towering like a demigod over the mean effeminate throng; there were the waving linen garments, and the reeling symbols, and the tossing hands, and the scowling faces of the priests of Isis; there was the dark-clad girl with her graceful pliant form; and there, yes, always there, in his maddening beauty, was the tall brave figure, gathering itself in act to strike. She could not analyse her feelings, she believed herself bewitched. Valeria had not reached the prime of her womanhood, without having sounded, as she thought, every chord of feeling, tasted of every cup that promised gratification or excitement. She had been flattered by brave, courted by handsome, and admired by clever men. Some she fancied, some she liked, some she laughed at, and some she told herself she loved. But this was a new sensation altogether. This intense and passionate longing she had never felt before. But for its novelty it would have been absolutely painful. A timid girl might have been frightened at it; but Valeria was no timid girl. She was a woman, on the contrary, who, with all the eagerness and impetuosity of her sex, possessed the tenacity of purpose and the resolution of a man.

Obviously, as she could not conquer the sentiment, it was her nature to indulge it,

“I have a message to Licinius,” said she, turning at the same time from the mirror, and suffering her long brown hair to fall over her face like a veil. “A message that I do not care to write, lest it should be seen by other eyes. Tell me, Myrrhina, how can I best convey it to my kinsman?”

The waiting-maid was far too astute to suggest the obvious arrangement of a private interview, than which nothing could have been easier, or to offer her own services, as an emissary who had already proved herself trustworthy in many a well-conducted intrigue; for Myrrhina knew her business too well to hesitate in playing into the hands of her mistress. So she assumed a look of perplexity and deep reflection while, finger on forehead, as the result of profound thought, she made the following reply:—

“It would be safest, Madam, would it not, to trust the matter to some confidential slave?”

Valeria’s heart was beating fast, and the fair cheek was pale again now, while she answered, with studied carelessness,

“Perhaps it would, if I could think of one.

You know his household, Myrrhina. Can I safely confide in any of them?"

"Those barbarians are generally faithful," observed the maid, with the most unconscious air. "I know Licinius has a British slave in whom he places considerable trust. You have seen him yourself, Madam."

"Have I?" answered Valeria, moving restlessly into a more comfortable attitude. "Should I know him again? What is he like?"

The blood had once more mounted to her forehead, beneath the long hair. Myrrhina, who was behind her, saw the crimson mantling even on her neck. She was a slave, and a waiting-maid, but she was also a woman, and she could not resist the temptation; so she answered maliciously—

"He is a big awkward-looking youth, of lofty stature, Madam, and with light curly hair. Stupid doubtless, and as trusty, probably, as he is thick-witted."

It is not safe to jest with a tigress unless you are outside the bars of her cage. Valeria made a quick impatient movement that warned the speaker she had gone too far. The latter was not wanting in readiness of resource. "I could

bring him here, madam,” she added, demurely, “within six hours.”

Her lady smiled pleasantly enough. “This evening, Myrrhina,” she said. “I shall scarcely be ready before. By the way, I am tired of those plain gold bracelets. Take them away, and don’t let me see them again. This evening you said—I suppose I had better leave it entirely to you.”

Both maid and mistress knew what this meant well. It implied full powers and handsome remuneration on one side, successful manœuvring and judicious blindness on the other. Valeria disposed herself for a long day’s dreaming: stretched indeed in bodily repose, but agitating her mind with all the harassing alternations of anticipation, and hope, and doubt, and fear—not without a considerable leavening of triumph, and a slight tinge of shame: while Myrrhina set herself energetically to work on the task she had undertaken; which, indeed, appeared to possess its difficulties, when she had ascertained at the first place she sought, namely the house of Licinius, that Esca was abroad, and no one knew in what direction he was likely to be found.

A woman’s wit, however, usually derives fresh

stimulus from opposition. Myrrhina was not without a large circle of acquaintances; and amongst others owned a staunch friend, and occasional admirer, in the person of Hirpinus the gladiator. That worthy took a sufficient interest in the athletic Briton to observe his movements, and was aware that Esca had spent some two or three hours by the Tiber-side on the previous evening; a fact which he imparted to Myrrhina, on cross-examination by the latter, readily enough, professing at the same time his own inability to account for it, inasmuch as there was neither wine-shop nor quoit-ground in the vicinity. Not so his intriguing little questioner. "A man does not wait two or three hours in one spot," thought Myrrhina, "for anything but a woman. Also, the woman, if she comes at all, is never so far behind her time. The probability then is, that she disappointed him, and the conclusion that he will be there again about sunset the following day."

Thus arguing, she resolved to attend at the trysting-place, and make a third in the interview, whether welcome or not; killing the intervening time, which might otherwise have hung heavily on her hands, by a series of experiments on the susceptibility of Hirpinus—an amusing pastime,

but wanting in excitement from its harmlessness ; for the gladiator had arrived at that period of life when outward charms, at least, are esteemed at their real value, and a woman must possess something more than a merry eye and a saucy lip if she would hope to rival the attraction of an easy couch and a flagon of old wine. Nevertheless, she laughed, and jested, and ogled, keeping her hand in, as it were, for practice against worthier occasions, till it was time to depart on her errand, when she made her escape from her sluggish admirer, with an excuse as false, and as plausible, as the smile on her lip.

Hirpinus looked after her as she flitted away, laughed, shook his head, and strode heavily off to the wine-shop, with an arch expression of amusement on his brave, good-humoured, and somewhat stupid face.

Myrrhina, drawing a veil about her head and shoulders so as effectually to conceal her features, proceeded to thread her way through the labyrinth of impoverished streets that led to the river side, as if familiar with their intricacies. When she reached her destination at last, she easily hid herself in a convenient lurking-place, from which she took care not to emerge till she

had learned all she wished to know about Esca and his companion.

"What do you want with me?" asked the Briton, a little disturbed by this saucy apparition, and not much pleased with the waiting-maid's familiar and malicious air.

"I am unwelcome, doubtless," answered the girl, with another peal of laughter; "nevertheless you must come with me whether you will or no. We Roman maidens take no denial, young man; we are not like your tall, pale, frozen women of the North."

Subscribing readily to this opinion, Esca felt indignant at the same time to be so completely taken possession of. "I have no leisure," said he, "to attend upon your fancies. I must homeward; it is already nearly supper-time."

"And you are a slave, I know," retorted Myrrhina with a gesture of supreme and provoking contempt. "*A slave!* You, with your strength, and stature, and courage, cannot call an hour of this fine cool evening your own."

"I know it," said he, bowing his head to conceal the flush of indignation that had risen to his brow. "I know it. A slave must clean his master's platter, and fill his cup to drink."

She could see that her thrust had pierced home ; but with all her predilections for his handsome person, she cared not how she wounded the manly heart within.

“And being a slave,” she resumed, “you may be loaded and goaded like a mule ! You may be kicked and beaten like a dog ! You cannot even resent it with hoofs and fangs as the dumb animal does when his treatment is harsher than he deserves ! You are a *man*, you know, though a barbarian ! You must cringe, and whine, and bite your lips, and be patient !”

Every syllable from that sharp tongue seemed to sting him like a wasp : his whole frame quivered with anger at her taunts ; but he scorned to show it, and putting a strong constraint upon his feelings, he only asked quietly—

“What would you with me ? It was not to tell me this that you watched and tracked me here.”

Myrrhina thought she had now brought the metal to a sufficiently high temperature for fusion. She proceeded to mould it accordingly.

“I tracked you here,” she said, “because I wanted you. I wanted you, because it is in my power to render you a great service. Listen, Esca ; you must come with me. It is not every

man in Rome would require so much persuasion to follow the steps of a pretty girl."

She looked very arch and tempting while she spoke, but her attractions were sadly wasted on the preoccupied Briton; and if she expected to win from him any overt act of admiration or encouragement, she was woefully disappointed.

"I cannot follow yours," said he; "my way lies in another direction. You have yourself reminded me that I am not my own master."

"That is the very reason," she exclaimed, clapping her hands exultingly. "I can show you the way to freedom. No one else can help you but Myrrhina; and if you attend to her directions you can obtain your liberty without delay."

"And why should *you* be disposed to confer on me such a benefit?" he asked, with instinctive caution, for the impulsive nature that jumps so hastily to conclusions, and walks open-eyed into a trap, is rarely born north of the Alps. "I am a barbarian, a stranger, almost an enemy. What have you and I in common?"

"Perhaps I have fallen in love with you myself," she laughed out; "perhaps you may be able to serve me in return. Come, you are as cold as the icy climate in which you were bred.

You shall take your choice of the two reasons; only waste no more time, but gird yourself, and follow me.”

Though it had never been dormant, the desire for liberty had, within the last two days, acquired a painful intensity in Esca’s breast. He had not indeed yet confessed to himself that he cherished an ardent attachment for Mariamne; but he was conscious that her society possessed for him an indefinable attraction, and that without her neither liberty nor anything else would be worth having. This new sensation made his position more galling than it had ever been before. He could not ignore the fact, that it was absurd for one whose existence was not his own, to devote that existence to another; and the degradation of slavery, which his lord’s kindness had veiled from him as much as possible while in his household, now appeared in all its naked deformity. He felt that no effort would be too desperate, no sacrifice too costly, to make for liberty; and that he would readily risk life itself, and lose it, to be free, if only for a week.

“You have seen my mistress,” resumed Myrrhina, as they hurried on through the now darkening streets; “the fairest lady and the most powerful

in Rome ; a near kinswoman, too, of your master. It needs but a word from her to make of you what she pleases. But she is wilful, you must know, and imperious, and cannot bear to be contradicted. Few women can."

Esca had yet to learn this peculiarity of the sex ; but he heard Myrrhina mention her mistress with vague misgivings, and forebodings of evil far different from the unmixed feelings of interest such a communication would have called forth a while ago.

"Did she send for me expressly?" he asked, with some anxiety of tone. "And how did *you* know where to find me in such a town as this?"

"I know a great many things," replied the laughing damsel ; "but I do not choose every one to be as wise as myself. I will answer both your questions though, if you will answer one of mine in return. Valeria did not mention you by name, and yet I think there is no other man in Rome would serve her turn but yourself ; and I knew that I should find you by Tiber-side, because you cannot keep a goose from the water, nor a fool from his fate. Will you answer my question as frankly? Do you love the dark, pale girl that fled away so hastily when I discovered you together?"

This was exactly what he had been asking himself the whole evening, with no very conclusive result ; it was not likely, therefore, that Myrrhina should elicit a satisfactory reply. The Briton coloured a little, hesitated, and gave an evasive answer.

“Like tends to like,” said he. “What is there in common between two strangers, from the two farthest extremities of the empire?”

Myrrhina clapped her hands in triumph. “Like tends to like, say you?” she exclaimed, exultingly. “You will tell another tale ere an hour be past. Hush ! be silent now, and step softly ; but follow close behind *me*. It is very dark in here, under the trees.”

Thus cautioning him, she led Esca through a narrow door out of the by-street, into which they had diverged, and stepped briskly on, with a confidence born of local knowledge that he imitated with difficulty. They were now in a thickly planted shrubbery which effectually excluded the rays of a rising moon, and in which it was scarce possible to distinguish even Myrrhina’s white dress. Presently they emerged upon a smooth and level lawn, shut in by a black group of cedars, through the lower branches of which peeped the crescent moon that had not long left the horizon, and

turning the corner of a colonnade, under a ghostly-looking statue, traversed another door, which opened softly to Myrrhina's touch, and admitted them into a long carpeted passage, with a lamp at the farther end.

"Stay here while I fetch a light," whispered the damsel; and gliding away for that purpose, returned presently to conduct Esca through a large dark hall into another passage, where she stopped abruptly, and lifting some silken hangings, that served for the door of an apartment, simply observed, "You will find food and wine there," and pushed him in.

Floods of soft and mellow light dazzled his eyes at first; but he soon realized the luxurious beauty of the retreat into which he had been forced. It was obvious that all the resources of wealth had been applied to its decoration with a lavish hand, guided by a woman's sensibility and a woman's taste. The walls were painted in frescoes of the richest colouring, and represented the most alluring scenes. Here the three jealous goddesses flashed upon bewildered Paris, in all the lustre of their immortal charms. A living envy sat on Juno's brow; a living scorn was stamped on Minerva's pale, proud face; and the living smile that won

her the golden apple, shone in Aphrodité's winning eyes. There glowed imperial Circé in her magic splendour; and the very victims of her spell seemed yet to crave, with fiery glances and with thirsty lips, for one more draught from the tempting, luscious, and degrading cup. A shapely Endymion lay stretched in dreams of love. A frightened Leda shrank while she caressed. Here fair Adonis bled to death, ripped by the monster in the forest glade; there, where the broad-leaved lilies lay sleeping on the shady pool, bent fond Narcissus, to look and long his life away; an infant Bacchus rolled amongst the grapes, in bronze; a little Cupid mourned his broken bow, in marble. Around the cornices a circle of nymphs and satyrs, in bas-relief, danced hand-in-hand—wild woodland creatures, exulting in all the luxuriance of beauty, all the redundancy of strength; and, yonder, just where the lamp casts its softest light on her attractions, stood the likeness of Valeria herself, depicted by the cunning painter in a loose, flowing robe that enhanced without concealing the stately proportions of her figure, and in an attitude essentially her own,—an attitude expressive of dormant passion, lulled by the languid insolence of power, and tinged with an im-

perious coquetry that she had found to be the most alluring of her charms.

It was bad enough to sit in that voluptuous room, under that mellow light, drinking the daintiest produce of Falernian vineyards, and gazing on such an image as Valeria's—an image of one who, beyond all women, was calculated to madden a heated brain, whose beauty could scarcely fail to captivate the outward senses, and take the heart by storm. It was bad enough to press the very couch of which the cushions still retained the print of her form—to see the shawl thrown across it, and trailing on the floor as though but now flung off—to touch the open bracelet hastily unclasped, yet warm from its contact with her arm. All this was bad enough, but worse was still to come.

Esca was in the act of setting down the goblet he had drained, and his eye was resting with an expression of admiration, not to be mistaken, on the picture opposite, when the rustling of the hangings caused him to turn his head. There was no more attraction now in bounding nymph or brilliant enchantress; haughty Juno, wise Minerva, and laughing Venus with her sparkling girdle, had passed into the shade. Valeria's likeness

was no longer the masterpiece of the apartment, for there in the doorway appeared the figure of Valeria herself. Esca sprang to his feet, and thus they stood, that noble pair, confronting each other in the radiant light. The hostess and her guest—the lady and the slave—the assailant and the assailed.



CHAPTER XIII.

NOLENS—VOLENS.



VALERIA trembled in every limb; yet should she have remained the calmer of the two, inasmuch as hers could scarcely have been the agitation of surprise. Such a step, indeed, as that on which she now ventured, had not been taken without much hesitation and many changes of mind.

No woman, we believe, ever becomes utterly unsexed; and the process by which even the boldest lose their instinctive modesty, is gradual in the extreme. The power, too, of self-persuasion, which is so finely developed in the whole human race, loses none of its efficacy in the reasonings of the less logical, and more impulsive half. People do not usually plunge headlong into vice. The shades are almost imperceptible by which the

love of admiration deepens into vanity, and vanity into imprudence, and imprudence, especially if thwarted by advice and encouraged by opportunity, into crime. Nevertheless, the stone that has once been set in motion, is pretty sure to reach the bottom of the hill at last; and “I might” grows to “I will,” and “I will,” ere long, becomes “I *must*.” Valeria’s first thought had only been to look again upon an exterior that pleased her eye; then she argued that having sent for her kinsman’s slave, there could be no harm in speaking to him: indeed, it would seem strange if she did not; and under any circumstances, of course there was no occasion that her colloquy should be overheard by all the maidens of her establishment, or even by Myrrhina, who, trusty as she might be, had a tongue of surpassing activity, and a love of gossip not to be controlled.

She ignored, naturally enough, that any unusual interest in the Briton should have caused her thus to summon him into her own private and peculiar retreat; thus to surround him with all that was dazzling to the eye, and alluring to the senses; thus to appear before him in the full glow of her personal beauty, set off by all the accessories of dress, jewels, lights, flowers, and perfumes, that

she could command. If she sent for him, it was but natural that he should find her encircled by the usual advantages of her station. It was no fault of hers, that these were gorgeous, picturesque, and overpowering. 'He might as well blame the old Falernian for its seduction of the palate, and its confusion of the brain. Let him take care of himself! she would see him, speak to him, smile on him, perhaps, and be *guided by circumstances*. A wise resolution this last in all cases, and by no means difficult to keep when the circumstances are under our own control.

Valeria, woman-like, was the first to speak, though she scarcely knew what to say. With a very becoming air of hesitation she kept clasping and unclasping a bracelet, the fellow of the one on the couch. She was doubtless conscious that her round white arm looked rounder and whiter in the process.

"I have sent for you," she began, "because I am informed I can rely implicitly on your truth and secresy. You are one they tell me who is incapable of betraying a trust. Is it not so?"

It is needless to say that Esca was already somewhat bewildered with the events of the evening, and in a mood not to be surprised at

anything. Nevertheless, he could only bow his head in acknowledgment of this tribute to his honesty, and murmur a few indistinct syllables of assent. She seemed to gain confidence now the ice was broken, and went on more fluently.

“I have a secret to confide. A secret that none but yourself must know. Honour, reputation, the fame of a noble family, depend on its never being divulged. And yet I am going to impart this secret to *you*. Am I not rash, foolish, and impulsive, thus to place myself in the power of one whom I know so little? What must you think of me? What *do* you think of me?”

The latter question, propounded with a deepening colour and a glance that conveyed volumes, was somewhat difficult to answer. He might have said, “Think of you? Why, that you are the most alluring mermaiden who ever tempted a mariner to shipwreck on the rocks!” but what he *did* say was this:

“I have never feared man, nor deceived woman yet. I am not going to begin now.”

She was a little disappointed at the coldness of his answer; yet her critical eye could not but approve the proud attitude he assumed, the stern look that came over his face, while he spoke.

She edged a little nearer him and went on in a softened tone.

“A woman is always somewhat lonely and helpless, whatever may be her station, and oh! how liable we are to be deceived, and how we weep and wring our hands in vain when it is so. But I knew *you* from the first. I can read characters at a glance. Do you remember when I called you to my litter in the street while you were walking with Hirpinus the gladiator?”

Again that warm crimson in the cheek—again that speaking flash from those dangerous eyes. Esca’s head was beginning to turn, and his heart to beat with a strange sensation of excitement and surprise.

“I am not likely to forget it,” said he, with a sort of proud humility. “It was such an honour as is seldom paid to one in my station.”

She smiled on him more kindly than ever. “I looked for you again,” she murmured, “and saw you not. I wanted one in whom I could confide. I have no counsellor, no champion, no friend. I said what has become of him? who else will do my bidding, and keep my secret? Then Myrrhina told me that you would be here to-night.”

She seemed to have something more to say

that would not out. She looked at the Briton with expectant, almost imploring eyes; but Esca was young and frank and simple, so he waited for her to go on, and Valeria, discouraged and intimidated for the first time, proceeded in a colder and more becoming tone.

“The packet with which I intrust you must be delivered by yourself into the hands of Licinius. Not another creature must set eyes on it. No one must know that you have received it from me, nor, indeed, that you have been here to-night. If necessary you must guard it with your life! Can I depend upon you?”

He was beginning to feel that he could not depend upon himself much longer. The lights, the perfumes, the locality, the seductive beauty near him, so lovely and so kind, were making wild work with his senses and his reason. Nevertheless, the whole position seemed so strange, so impossible, that he could hardly believe he was awake. There was plenty of pride in his character, but no leavening of vanity; and like many another gentle and inexperienced nature, he shrank from offending a woman's delicacy, with a repugnance, that in some cases is exceedingly puzzling and provoking to the woman herself. So he put a

strong constraint upon his feelings, and undertook the delivery of the missive with incredible simplicity and composure. The statue of Hermes at the door could not have looked colder and more impenetrable. She was a little at a loss. She must detain him at all hazards, for she felt that when once gone he would be gone for ever. She determined to lead him into conversation; and she chose the topic which, originating, perhaps, in the instinctive jealousy of a woman, was of all others the most subversive of her plans.

“I saw you once again,” she said, “but it was in the hurry and confusion of that sudden broil. It was no fault of mine that the priests committed so gross an outrage on the poor thing you rescued. I would have helped you myself had you required assistance, but you carried her off as an eagle takes a kid. What became of the girl?”

The question was accompanied by a sharp inquisitive glance, and a forced smile of very perceptible annoyance wreathed her lip when she perceived Esca’s embarrassed manner and reddening brow; but she had unwittingly called up the Briton’s good genius, and for all women on earth, save one, he was a man of marble once more.

“I placed her in safety with her father,” he

replied ; adding with an assumption of deep humility, “ Will you please to give me your commands and let me depart ? ”

Valeria was so totally unused to opposition in any of her whims or caprices that she could scarcely believe this obvious indifference was real. She persuaded herself that the Briton was so overpowered by her condescension, as to be only afraid of trespassing too far on such unexpected kindness, and she resolved that it should be no fault of hers if he were not quickly undeceived. She sank upon the couch in her most bewitching attitude, and looking fondly up in his face, bade him fetch her tablets from the writing-stand. “ For,” said she, “ I have not yet even prepared my communication to Licinius. Shall you be very weary of me, if I keep you my prisoner so long ? ”

Was it accident or design that entangled those rosy fingers with Esca’s, as she took the tablets from his hand ? Was it accident or design that shook the hair off her face, and loosed the rich brown clusters to fall across her glowing neck and bosom. It was surely strange that when she bent over the tablets her cheek turned pale, and her hand shook so that she could not form a letter on

the yielding wax. She beckoned him nearer and bent her head towards him till the drooping curls trailed across his arm.

“I cannot write,” said she, in trembling accents. “Something seems to oppress me—I am faint—I can scarcely breathe—Myrrhina shall give you the missive to-morrow. In the meantime, we are alone. Esca, you will not betray me. I can depend upon you. You are my slave, is it not so? This shall be your manacle!”

While she yet spoke, she took the bracelet from her arm and tried to clasp it round his wrist; but the glittering fetter was too narrow for the large-boned Briton, and she could not make it meet. Pressing it hard with both hands, she looked up in his face and laughed.

One responsive glance. The faintest shadow of yielding on those impassible features, and she would have told him all. But it came not. He shook the bracelet from his arm; and while he did so, she recovered herself, with the instantaneous self-command women seem to gather from an emergency.

“It was but to try your honesty!” she said, very haughtily, and rising to her feet. “A man who is not to be tempted, even by gold, can be safely

trusted in such an affair as mine. You may go now," she added, with the slightest bend of her head. "To-morrow, if I require you, I shall take care that you hear from me through Myrrhina."

She looked after him as he disappeared under the silken hangings of the portal: her face quivered, her bosom heaved, and she clenched both hands till the round white arms grew hard as marble. Then she bit her lip once, savagely, and so seemed to regain her accustomed composure, and the usual dignity of her bearing.

Nevertheless, when the despised bracelet caught her eye, lying neglected on the couch, she dashed it fiercely down, and stamped upon it, and crushed and ground the jewel beneath her heel against the floor.



CHAPTER XIV.

CÆSAR.



WHEN a woman feels herself scorned, her first impulse seems to be revenge at any price. Some morbid sentiment, which the other sex can hardly fathom, usually prompts her in such cases to select for her instrument the man, whom in her heart, she loathes and despises, whose society is an insult and whose attentions are a disgrace. Thus lowering herself in her own esteem, she knows that she inflicts a poisoned wound on the offender.

With all Valeria's self-command, her feelings had nearly got the better of her before Esca left the house. Had it been so, she would never have forgiven herself. But she managed to

restrain them, and preserved an outward composure even while Myrrhina prepared her for repose. That damsel was much puzzled by the upshot of her manœuvres. From a method of her own, which long practice rendered familiar, she had made herself acquainted with all that occurred between her mistress and the handsome slave. Why their interview should have had no more definite result, she was at a loss to conceive. Altogether, Myrrhina was inclined to think that Esca had been so captivated by her own charms, as to be insensible to those of Valeria. This flattering supposition opened up a perspective of hazard, intrigue, and cross-purposes, that it was delicious to contemplate. The maid retired to her couch exulting. The mistress writhed in an agony of wounded pride and shame.

Morning, however, brought its unfailing accession of clear-sightedness and practical resolve. There are hours of the night in which we can abandon ourselves to love, hatred, despair, or sorrow with a helplessness that possesses in it some of the elements of repose; but with dawn reality resumes her sway, and the sufferer is indeed to be pitied, who can turn away from daylight, without an impulse to be up and doing,

who wishes only, in the lethargy of utter desolation, that it was evening once more.

Valeria was not a woman to pass over the slight she had sustained. Few of them but will forgive an injury more readily than an insult.

Long before she rose she had made up her mind where, and when, and how to strike; nothing remained but to select the weapon, and put a keener edge upon the steel.

Now Valeria had long been aware, that as far as was compatible with his disposition Julius Placidus was devoted to her service. Indeed he had told her so many a time, with an assumption of off-hand gallantry, which perhaps she estimated at less than its proper value. Nevertheless, the compliments she received from the Tribune were scarcely so well turned as might be expected from a man of his outward polish, refined manners, and general bad character. The woman's ear could detect the ring of truth, amidst all the jingle that accompanied it; and Valeria felt that the Tribune loved her as much as it was possible for him to love anything but himself.

To do her justice, she liked him none the better on that account. He was a man whom she must have hated under any circumstances, but perhaps

she despised him a little less for this one redeeming quality of good taste. Here was a weapon, however, keen, and strong, and pliant, placed moreover, so to speak, within reach of her hand. She rose and dressed, languid, haughty, and composed as usual; but Myrrhina, who knew her, remarked a red spot burning on either cheek, and once a shudder, as of intense cold, passed over her, though it was a sunny morning in Rome.

Julius Placidus received a letter ere noon that seemed to afford him infinite satisfaction. The gilded chariot flashed brighter than ever in the sun, the white horses whirled it like lightning through the streets. Automedon's curls floated on the breeze, and the boy was even more insolent than usual without rebuke. Lolling on his velvet cushions the Tribune's smile seemed to have lost something of its malice; and though the tiger-look was on him still, it was that of the sleek and satisfied tiger who has been fed. That look never left him all day, while he transacted business in the Forum, while he showed his grace and agility at ball in the Fives' Court, while he reposed after his exertions at the bath; but it was more apparent still when the hour of supper arrived, and

he took his place in the banqueting-hall of Cæsar, with some of the bravest soldiers, the noblest senators, the greatest statesmen, wits, gluttons, and profligates in the empire.

A banquet with Vitellius was no light and simple repast. Leagues of sea and miles of forest had been swept to furnish the mere ground-work of the entertainment. Hardy fishermen had spent their nights on the heaving wave, that the giant turbot might flap its snowy flakes on the Emperor's table broader than its broad dish of gold. Many a swelling hill, clad in the dark oak coppice, had echoed to ringing shout of hunter, and deep-mouthed bay of hound, ere the wild boar yielded his grim life by the morass, and the dark grisly carcase was drawn off to provide a standing-dish that was only meant to gratify the eye. Even the peacock roasted in its feathers was too gross a dainty for epicures, who studied the art of gastronomy under Cæsar; and that taste would have been considered rustic in the extreme, which could partake of more than the mere fumes and savour of so substantial a dish. A thousand nightingales had been trapped and killed, indeed, for this one supper, but brains and tongues were all they contributed to the banquet, while even

the wing of a roasted hare would have been considered far too coarse and common food for the imperial board.

There were a dozen of guests reaching round the ivory table, and so disposed that the head of each was turned towards the giver of the feast. Cæsar was, indeed, in his glory. A garland of white roses crowned his pale and bloated face, enhancing the unhealthiness of its aspect. His features had originally been well-formed and delicate, expressive of wit, energy, and great versatility of character. Now the eyes were sunken, and the vessels beneath them so puffed and swollen as to discolour the skin; the jowl, too, had become large and heavy, imparting an air of sensual stupidity to the whole countenance, which brightened up, however, at the appearance of a favourite dish, or the smack of some rich luscious wine. He was busy at present with the eager, guzzling avidity of a pig; and he propped his unwieldy body, clad in its loose white gown, on one flabby arm, while with the other he fed himself on sharp-biting salads, salted herrings, pickled anchovies, and such stimulants as were served in the first course of a Roman entertainment, to provoke the hunger that the rest of the

meal should satisfy. Now and then his eye wandered for an instant through the long shining vistas of the hall, amongst its marble pillars, its crimson hangings, its vases crowned with blushing fruit and flowers, its side-boards blazing with chalices, and flagons, and plates of burnished gold, as though he expected and winced from a blow; but the restless glance was sure to return to the table, and quench itself once more in the satisfaction of his favourite employment.

Next to the Emperor was placed Paris, the graceful pantomimist, whose girlish face was already flushed with wine, and who turned his dark laughing eyes from one to another of the guests with the good-humoured insolence of incipient intoxication. The young actor's dress was extravagant in the extreme, and he wore a collar of pearls, the gift of an empress, that would have purchased a province. He was talking volubly to a fat coarse-featured man, his neighbour, who answered him at intervals with a grunt of acquiescence, but in whose twinkling eye lurked a world of wit and sarcasm, and from whose thick sensual lips, engrossed as they were with the business of the moment, would drop ever and anon some pungent jest, that was sure to be

repeated to-morrow at every supper-table in Rome. Montanus was a crafty statesman and a practised diplomatist, whose society was sought for at the Court, whose opinions carried weight in the Senate; but the old voluptuary had long discovered that there was no safety under the Empire for those who took a leading part in the Council, but that certain distinction awaited proficiency at the banquet—so he devoted his powerful intellect to the study of gastronomy and the fabrication of witty sayings; nor did he ever permit the outward expression of his countenance to betray a consciousness of the good things that went into and came out of his mouth.

Beyond him again reclined Licinius; his manly face and noble bearing presenting a vivid contrast to those who surrounded him, and who treated him, one and all, including Cæsar himself, with marked deference and respect. The old soldier, however, appeared somewhat weary, and out of his element. He loathed these long entertainments, so opposed to his own simple habits; and regarded the company in his secret heart with a good-humoured, yet very decided contempt. So he sat through the banquet as he would have kept watch on an outpost. It was tedious, it

was disagreeable. There was nothing to be gained by it; but it was duty, and it must be done.

Far different in the frank joyous expression he knew so well how to put on, was the mien of Julius Placidus, as he replied to a brief, indistinct question from the Emperor (murmured with his mouth full), by a sally that set every one near him laughing, and even raised a smile on the pale face of Vitellius himself. It was the Tribune's cue to make his society universally popular—to be all things to all men, especially to win the confidence of his imperial host. There is an art in social success, no less than in any other triumph of natural ability. The rein must never be completely loosed, the bow never stretched to its full compass. Latent power, ready to be called forth, is the secret of all grace; and while the observed does *well*, it must be apparent to the observer that he could do *better* if he chose. Also, to be really popular, a man, though a good deal liked, should be a little feared. Julius Placidus, excelled in the “retort courteous,” which he could deliver without the slightest hesitation or change of countenance; and a nickname or a sarcasm once inflicted by the ready-

witted Tribune clung afterwards to its object like a burr. Then he possessed besides the invaluable qualification of a discriminating taste in seasonings, the result of a healthy palate, refined, but not destroyed, by the culture bestowed on it; and could drink every man of them, except Montanus, under the table, without his stomach or his brain being affected by the debauch.

Our acquaintance Spado was also of the party. Generally a buffoon of no mean calibre, and one whose special talent lay in such coarse and practical jests as served to amuse Vitellius when his intellects had become too torpid to appreciate the nicer delicacies of wit, the eunuch was tonight peculiarly dull and silent. He reclined, with his head resting on his hand, and seemed to conceal as much as he could of his face, one side of which was swollen and discoloured as from a blow. His fat unwieldy form looked more disgusting than usual in its sumptuous dress, fastened and looped up at every fold with clasps of emeralds and pearls, and though he ate slowly and with difficulty, he seemed determined to lose none of the gratifications of the meal.

There were a few more guests,—one or two senators,—who with the caution, but not the

genius of Montanus, were conspicuous for nothing but their fulsome adulation of the Emperor. A tall sullen looking man, commander of the Prætorian Guard, who never laid aside the golden breast-plate in which he was encased, and who seemed only anxious for the conclusion of the entertainment. Three or four unknown and undistinguished persons, called in Roman society by the expressive term "Shades," whose social position, and, indeed, whose very existence, depended on the patrons they followed. Amongst these were two freedmen of the Emperor, pale anxious-looking beings, with haggard eyes and care-worn faces. It was their especial duty to guard against poison, by tasting of every dish served to their employer. It might be supposed, that, as in previous reigns, one such functionary would have been enough; but the great variety of dainties in which the enormous appetite of Vitellius enabled him to indulge, rendered it impossible for any one stomach to keep pace with him throughout the whole of a meal, and these devoted champions took it by turns to guard their master with their lives. Keen appetites and jovial looks, were not to be expected from men engaged on such a duty.

The first course, though long protracted, came to an end at last. Its greatest delicacy, consisting of dormice sprinkled with poppy-seed and honey, had completely disappeared. The tables were cleared by a band of Asiatic youths, richly habited, who entered to the sounds of wild Eastern music, and bore off the fragments that remained. As they emerged at one door, a troop of handsome, fair-haired maidens,—barbarian captives,—simply clad in white muslin, and garlanded with flowers, entered at another, carrying the golden dishes and vessels that contained the second course. In the meantime, hanging curtains parted slowly from before a recess in the middle of the hall, and disclosed three Syrian dancing-girls, grouped like a picture, in different attitudes of voluptuous grace. Shaded lamps were so disposed as to throw a rosy light upon their limbs and faces; while soft thin vapours curled about them, rising from braziers burning perfumed incense at their feet. Simultaneously they clashed their cymbals, and bounded wildly out upon the floor. Then began a measure of alternate languor and activity, now swelling into frantic bacchanalian gestures, now sinking into tender lassitude or picturesque repose. The

warm blood glowed in the dark faces of these daughters of the Sun, the black eyes flashed under their long eyelashes, and their white teeth showed like pearls between the rich red lips; while the beautifully turned limbs, and the flexible, undulating forms, writhed themselves into attitudes suggestive of imperious conquest, coy reluctance, or yielding love.

The dance was soon over; wilder and faster flitted the glancing feet, and tossed the shapely hands, encircled with bracelets and anklets of tiny silver bells. When the measure was whirling at its speediest, the three stopped short, and at once, as if struck into stone, formed a group of rare fantastic beauty at the very feet of Cæsar's guests; who one and all broke into a murmur of unfeigned applause. As, touching their mouths and foreheads with their hands in Eastern obeisance, they retired, Placidus flung after them a collar of pearls, to be picked up by her who was apparently the leader of the three. One of the Emperor's freedmen seemed about to follow his example, for he buried his hand in his bosom, but either changed his mind or else found nothing there, since he drew it forth again empty; while Vitellius himself, plucking

a bracelet from his arm, threw it after the retreating dancers, remarking that it was intended as “a bribe to go away, for they only distracted attention from matters of real importance, now that the second course had come in,”—to which Montanus gave his cordial approval. fixing his eyes at the same time on the breast of a flamingo in which the skilful carver had just inserted the point of his long knife.

It would be endless to go into the details of such a banquet as that which was placed before the guests of Cæsar. Wild boar, pasties, goats, every kind of shell-fish, thrushes, beccaficoes, vegetables of all descriptions, and poultry, were removed to make way for the pheasant, the guinea-hen, the turkey, the capon, venison, ducks, woodcocks, and turtle-doves. Everything that could creep, or fly, or swim, and could boast a delicate flavour when cooked, was pressed into the service of the Emperor; and when appetite was appeased and could do no more, the strongest condiments and other remedies were used to stimulate fresh hunger and consume a fresh supply of superfluous dainties. But the great business of the evening was not yet half finished. Excess of eating was indeed the object; but it

was to excess of drinking that the gluttons of that period looked as the especial relief of every entertainment, since the hope of each seemed to be, that when thoroughly flooded, and, so to speak, washed out with wine, he might begin eating again. The Roman was no drunkard like the barbarian, for the sake of that wild excitement of the brain which is purchased by intoxication. No, he ate to repletion that he might drink with gratification. He drank to excess, that he might eat again.

Another train of slaves now cleared the table. These were Nubian eunuchs, clad in white turbans and scarlet tunics, embroidered with seed pearls and gold. They brought in the dessert—choice fruits heaped upon vases of the rarest porcelain, sweetmeats in baskets of silver filigree, Syrian dates borne by miniature golden camels or exquisite workmanship—masses of flowers in the centre, and perfumes burning at the corners of the table. Behind each couch containing its three guests stood a sable cup-bearer, deaf and dumb, whose only business it was to fill for his especial charge. These mutes were procured at vast expense from every corner of the empire; but Cæsar especially prided himself on their

similarity in face and figure. To-day he would be served by Germans, to-morrow by Gauls, the next by Ethiopians, and so on; nor, though deprived of the organs of speech and hearing, were these ministers of Bacchus unobservant of what took place amongst the votaries on whom they waited; and it was said that the mutes in the palace heard more confidences, and told more secrets, than all the old women in Rome put together.

And now, taking his cue from the Emperor, each man loosened the belt of his tunic, shifted the garland of flowers off his brows, disposed himself in an easier attitude on his couch, and proffered his cup to be filled by the attendant. The great business of eating was for the present concluded, and deep drinking about to commence. When marvelling, however, at the quantity of wine consumed by the Romans in their entertainments, we must remember that it was the pure and unadulterated juice of the grape,—that it was in general freely mixed with water, and that they thus imbibed but a very small portion of alcohol, which is in reality the destructive quality of all stimulants to the welfare of the stomach and the brain.



CHAPTER XV.

RED FALERNIAN.



ÆSAR'S eye, though dim and sunken, flashed up for a moment with a spark of enthusiasm.

"The beccaficoes," said he, "were a thought over-seasoned, but the capon's liver stewed in milk was perfection. Varus, see that it is served again at the Imperial table within the week."

The freedman took out his tablets and made a note of the royal commands with a somewhat unsteady hand, while Vitellius, draining his cup to the dregs, smacked his lips, and let his great chin sink on his breast once more.

The other guests conversed freely. Licinius and one of the senators were involved in an argument on military matters, with which the

man of peace seemed almost as conversant as the man of war, and on which he laid down the law with far more confidence. Placidus was describing certain incidents of the campaign in Judæa, with an air of unassuming modesty and a deference to the opinions of others, which won him no little favour from those who sat near and listened, throwing in, every now and then, a chance expression or trifling anecdote, derogatory, by implication, to Vespasian's military skill, and eulogistic of Vitellius ; for this reason doubly sweet in the ears of him at whose board the Tribune sat. Montanus, whose cup was filled and emptied with startling rapidity, looked about him for a subject on which to vent some of the sarcasm with which he was charged, and found it in the woe-begone appearance of Spado, who, despite the influence of food and wine, seemed unusually depressed and ill-at-ease. The eunuch on ordinary occasions was a prince of boon companions, skilled in all the niceties of gastronomy, versed in the laws of drinking, overflowing with mirth and jollity, an adroit flatterer where flattery was acceptable, and a joyous buffoon who could give and take with equal readiness and good-humour, when banter was the order of the

day. Now, less thirsty than usual, the feast seemed to have no enlivening effect on his disposition. He was silent, preoccupied, and to all appearance intent only on concealing his bruised cheek from the observation of those about him. He had never been struck in anger, never even stood face to face with a man before, and it had cowed him. The soft self-indulgent voluptuary could neither forget nor overcome his feelings of combined wrath, dismay, and shame. Montanus turned round and emptied a brimming goblet to his health.

“You are cheerless to-night, man!” quoth the senator; “you drink not, neither do you speak. What, has the red Falernian lost its flavour? or has some Canidia bewitched you with her evil eye? You used to be a prince of boon-companions, Spado,—thirsty as a camel in the Libyan desert, unsatiated as the sand on which he travels, and now your eye is dull, your face dejected, and your cup stands untasted, unnoticed, though bubbling to the brim. By the spear of Bacchus, ’tis not the fault of the liquor!” and Montanus emptied his own goblet with the air of a man who thoroughly appreciated the vintage he extolled.

Vitellius looked up for an instant, roused by the congenial theme.

“There is nothing the matter with the wine,” said Cæsar. “Fill round.” The imperial hint was not to be disregarded, and Spado, with a forced smile, put his goblet to his lips and drained it to the last drop. In doing so the discoloration of his face was very apparent; and the guests who had now arrived at that stage of conviviality where candour takes the place of politeness, proceeded to make their remarks without reserve.

“You have painted too thick,” said one of the freedmen, alluding to an effeminacy of the times which the male sex were not ashamed to practise.

“You have taken off the paste and the skin with it,” continued the other, whose own mistress was in the daily habit of spreading a kind of poultice over her whole countenance, and who might therefore be a good judge of the process and its results.

“You have been in the wars!” sneered one guest. “Or the amphitheatre!” echoed another. “’Tis a love-token from Chloe!” laughed a third. “Or a remembrance from Lydia!” added a fourth. “Nay,” interposed Montanus, “our

friend is too experienced a campaigner to come off second-best with a foe of that description. There must have been a warm encounter to leave such traces as those. She must have been a very Amazon, Spado, that could maul thee thus."

The eunuch looked from one to another of his tormentors with rather an evil smile. He well knew, however, that any appearance of annoyance would add tenfold to the ridicule which he must make up his mind to undergo, and that the best way for a man to turn a jest, even when to his own disadvantage, is to join in it himself; so he glanced at the Emperor, took a long draught of red Falernian, and assumed a face of quaint and good-humoured self-commiseration.

"Talk not to me of Amazons," said he, whereat there was a general laugh. "Tell me not of Chloes, and Lydias, and Lalages, and the rest. What's a Helen of Troy compared to a flask of this red Falernian? Why good wine gets better the longer you keep it, while woman loses her flavour year by year. 'Faith, if you only wait till she is old enough, she becomes very sour vinegar indeed. Even in the first flush of her beauty, I doubt whether any of you in your hearts think she is worth the trouble of catching. Still you

know a man likes to look at a pretty face. Mine had not otherwise been so disfigured now. I had an adventure on that score but two nights ago. Would Cæsar like to hear it?"

Cæsar gave a nod and a grunt that signified acquiescence. Thus encouraged, Spado went on:

"It was the feast of Isis. I was coming from the worship of the goddess, and the celebration of those sacred rites, which may not be disclosed to the vulgar and the profane—mysteries too holy to be mentioned save to pure and virgin ears." Here the countenance of Montanus assumed an expression that made even Cæsar smile, and caused the rest to laugh outright. "The procession was returning filled with inspiration from the goddess. The acolytes leaping and dancing in the van, the priests marching majestically under her symbols, and some of the noblest matrons in Rome bringing up the rear. The noblest and the fairest," repeated Spado, glancing round him complacently. "I name no names; but you all know that ours is not a vulgar worship, nor an illiberal creed." Here Placidus stirred somewhat uneasily on his couch, and buried his face in his cup.

"The Roman people have ever paid the highest honours to our Egyptian goddess," proceeded the

eunuch; "we lack the support of the plebeian, no more than the worship of the patrician. Thus we flourish and drain draughts of plenty from the silver udders of our sacred cow. Well, they made way for us in the streets, both men and women—all but one slender girl dressed in black, who coming quickly round a corner found herself in the midst of us, and seemed too frightened to move. In another minute she would have been trampled to death by the crowd, when I seized hold of her in order to draw her into a place of safety while they passed."

"Or to see what sort of a face she hid under her black hood?" interrupted Montanus.

"Not so," replied the narrator, though obviously gratified by the impeachment. "Such follies I leave to senators, and statesmen, and soldiers. My object was simply to afford her my protection. I had better have plucked a nettle with my naked hand. The girl screamed and struggled as if she had never looked in a man's face before."

"She was frightened at your beard," said one of the freedmen, looking at Spado's smooth fat face. The latter winced but affected not to hear. "Coax a frightened woman," said he, "and frighten an angry one. I flatter myself I know

how to deal with them all. The girl would have been quiet enough had I been let alone, when just as she began to look kindly in my face, up comes an enormous barbarian, a hideous giant with waving yellow hair, and tries to snatch the maiden by main force from my grasp. I am a strong man as you may perhaps have observed, my friends, and a fierce one when my blood is up. I showed fight. I struck him to the earth. He rose again with redoubled fury, and taking me at a disadvantage while I was protecting the girl, inflicted this injury on my face. I was stunned for an instant, and he seized that opportunity to make his escape. Well for him that he did so. Let him keep out of the way if he be wise. Should he cross my path again, he had better be in Euchenor's hands than mine; I will show him no mercy." and Spado quaffed off his wine and squared his fat shoulders with the air of a gladiator.

"And what became of the girl?" asked Paris, who had hitherto listened to the recital with utter indifference.

"She was carried off by the barbarian," replied Spado. "Poor thing! I believe sorely against her will. Nevertheless, she was borne off by the Briton."

“A Briton!” exclaimed Licinius, whose intense contempt for Spado had hitherto kept him silent, and who had already heard the truth of the story from his slave:

“A Briton,” repeated the eunuch. “It was impossible he could be otherwise from his size and ferocity. The Gaul, you see, is bigger than the Roman. The German than the Gaul. The Briton by the same argument must be bigger than the German; and this hideous giant must consequently have been one of those savage islanders. I take my logic from the Greeks.”

“But not your boxing, it seems,” observed Montanus. “We must have Euchenor to give you some lessons, if you run your head into these street-brawls whenever you come across a woman with a veil.”

“Nay,” answered the eunuch, “he took me at a disadvantage; nevertheless he was a large and powerful athlete, there is no denying it.”

“They are the finest men we have in the empire,” said Licinius, thinking in his heart that the women were the fairest too.

“Their oysters are better than ours,” observed Cæsar, with an air of profound and impartial judgment.

“I grant the oysters, but I deny the men,” said Placidus, reflecting that his patriotism would be acceptable to his audience. “The Roman is the natural conqueror of the world. They cannot stand against our countrymen in the arena.” The guests all joined in a cordial assent. Had it not been so, perhaps Licinius would have scarce thought it worth while to continue the argument. Now, though half ashamed of his warmth, he took up the matter with energy.

“There is a Briton in my house at this moment,” said he, “who is a stronger and finer man than you will produce in Rome.”

“You mean that long-legged lad with the mop of light hair!” said Placidus, contemptuously. “I have seen him. I call him a boy, not a man.”

Licinius felt somewhat irritated. He did not particularly like his company; and between two such opposite natures as his own and the Tribune’s there existed a certain hidden repugnance, which was sure sooner or later to break forth. He answered angrily—

“I will match him against any one you can produce to run, leap, wrestle, throw the quoit, and swim.”

“Those are a boy’s accomplishments,” retorted

the other, coolly. "What I maintain is this, that whether from want of courage or skill, or both, these islanders are of no use with the steel. I would wish no better sport than to fight him myself in the arena, with the permission of Cæsar,"—and the Tribune bowed gracefully to his imperial host, who looked from one to the other of the disputants, without the slightest apparent interest in their discussion.

At this period of the empire, when, although manners had become utterly dissolute, something was still left of the old audacity that had made the Roman a conqueror wherever he planted his foot, it was by no means unusual for men of patrician rank to appear in their own proper persons, a spectacle for the vulgar, in the amphitheatre. It was perhaps not unnatural that a desire for imitation should at last be aroused by the excessive fondness for these games of bloodshed, which pervaded all classes of the community. We have nothing in modern times that can at all convey to us the passion of the Roman citizen for the amusements of his Circus. They were as necessary to his existence as daily bread. *Panem et Circenses* had passed into a familiar proverb. He would leave his home, neglect his

business, forfeit his bath, to sit for hours on the benches of the amphitheatre, exposed to heat and crowding, and every sort of inconvenience, and would bring his food with him rather than run the risk of losing his place. And all this to see trained gladiators shedding each other's blood, wild beasts tearing foreign captives limb from limb, and imitation battles which differed in no respect from real, save that the wounded were not spared, and the slaughter consequently far greater in proportion to the number of combatants engaged. If a statesman wished to court popularity, if an Emperor desired to blot out a whole page of enormities and crimes, he had but to give the people one of these free entertainments of blood—the more victims the better—and they were ready to approve of any measure, and to pardon any atrocity.

Ere long some fierce spirits panted to take part in the sports they so loved to contemplate; and the disgraceful exhibition ceased to be confined to hireling gladiators or condemned slaves. Knights and patricians entered the arena, to contend for the praises of the vulgar; and the noblest blood in Rome was shed for the gratification of plebeian spectators, who sitting at ease munching cakes and

sausages, could contemplate with placid interest, the death-agonies of the Cornelii or the Gracchi.

Julius Placidus, like many other fashionable youths of the period, prided himself on his skill in the deadly exercises of the Circus. He had appeared before the Roman public at different times, armed with all the various weapons of the gladiator; but the exercise in which he considered himself most perfect was that of the Trident and the Net. The contest between the *retiarius* and the *secutor* was always a favourite spectacle with the public. The former carried an ample casting-net upon his shoulders, a three-pronged spear in his hand; beyond this he was totally unarmed either for attack or defence. The latter with a short sword, vizored helmet, and oblong shield, would at first sight appear to have fought at great advantage over his opponent. Nevertheless the arts of the *retiarius* in entangling his adversary had arrived at such perfection that he was constantly the conqueror. Once down, and involved in the fatal meshes, there was no escape for the swordsman; and from some whimsical reason the populace seldom granted him quarter when vanquished. Great activity and speed of foot were the principal qualities

required by the *retiarius*, for if he failed in his cast he was compelled to fly from his adversary while preparing his net for a fresh attempt, and if overtaken his fate was sealed.

Placidus possessed extraordinary personal activity. His eye was very correct and his throw generally deadly. It may be too that there was something pleasing to the natural cruelty of his disposition in the contemplation of an antagonist writhing and helpless on the sand. It was his delight to figure in the arena with the deadly net laid in careful festoons upon his shoulder, and the long barbed trident quivering in his grasp. Licinius fell into the snare, if snare it was, readily enough.

"I would wager a province on Esca," said he, "against any one but a trained gladiator; and I think he could hold his own with the best of *them*, after a month's practice."

"Then you accept my challenge!" exclaimed Placidus, with a studied carelessness of manner that dissembled an eagerness he could scarcely control.

"Let us hear the terms over a fresh flask of Falernian," observed the Emperor, glad of such a stimulant with his wine.

“I ask for no weapons but the Trident and the Net,” said Placidus, looking fixedly at Licinius. “Esca, if you so call him, may be armed as usual with sword and helmet.”

“And shield,” interrupted the other: too old a soldier, even in the excitement of the moment, to throw a chance away.

Placidus affected to demur. “Well,” said he, after a few moments’ hesitation. “’Tis but a young swordsman, and a barbarian; I give you the shield in.”

A vision crossed the brain of Licinius, that already made him repent of his rashness. He saw the fine form writhing in those pitiless meshes, like a beast taken in the toils. He saw the frank blue eyes, looking upward brave and kindly even in their despair. He saw the unsparing arm raised to strike, and the bright curling locks dabbled all in blood. But then he remembered the Briton’s extraordinary strength and activity, his natural courage and warlike education—he was irritated too by the insolent malice that gleamed in the Tribune’s eyes; and he persuaded himself that nothing but renown and triumph could accrue to his favourite from such a contest.

“Be it so,” said he; “*retiarius* and *secutor*.”

You will have no child's play, I can tell you: and now for the terms of the wager. I stake no man's life against a morsel of tinsel or a few polished pebbles, I warn you at once."

He glanced while he spoke somewhat contemptuously, over the costly ornaments that decorated the Tribune's dress.

The latter laughed good-humouredly. "A dozen slaves," said he, "would scarce fetch the value of my sleeve-clasps. At least, a dozen of these islanders, whom you may capture by scores every time a legion moves its camp. Listen, I will wager two of my white horses against your picture of Daphne, or the bust of Euphrosyne that stands in your bath-room. Nay, I will give you more advantage still. I will stake the whole team, and the chariot into the bargain, against the British slave himself!"

Again had the other been watching him narrowly, he must have perceived a strange suppressed eagerness on the Tribune's face, but he was preoccupied and annoyed; he had gone too far to retract, and a murmur from the listening guests denoted their opinion of the generosity displayed in this last proposal. When a man has placed himself in a false position, his efforts at

extrication generally plunge him deeper than before. Quick as lightning, Licinius bethought him that the present bargain might probably save Esca's life, in the unlikely event of his being conquered, so he closed with it unhesitatingly, though he regretted doing so a moment afterwards.

The match was accordingly made upon the following terms. That Esca should enter the amphitheatre during the approaching games of Ceres, armed with sword, shield, and helmet, to oppose Placidus, whose only weapons were to be the trident and the net. That in the event of the latter being worsted, his four white horses and gilded chariot should become the property of Licinius; but that if he obtained the victory, and the populace permitted him to spare the vanquished, then his late antagonist should become his slave; and how enviable would be that position could only be known to the Tribune himself and one other person from whom he had that day received kinder looks and smiles than she had ever before granted to an unwelcome suitor.

The business of drinking, which had been somewhat interrupted by these complicated discussions, was now resumed with greater energy than before.

Placidus emptying his goblet with the triumphant air of one who has successfully accomplished a difficult task; Licinius like a man who seeks to drown anxiety and self-reproach in wine. The Emperor quaffed and quaffed again with his habitual greediness; and the remainder of the guests acted studiously in imitation of the Emperor.



CHAPTER XVI.

THE TRAINING-SCHOOL.

BUT Licinius had an ordeal to go through on the following day, which was especially painful to the kind heart of the Roman general. When the terms of the combat were explained to the person chiefly interested, that young warrior eagerly accepted the challenge as affording an opportunity for indulgence in those feats of arms which early education had rendered so pleasing to his martial disposition. He could vanquish two such men as the Tribune, he thought, at any exercise and with any weapons ; but his face sank when he learned the penalty of failure, and a shudder passed through his whole frame at the bare possibility of becoming a slave to any one but his present master. It nerved him, however, all the

more in his resolution to conquer; and when Licinius, reproaching himself bitterly the while, promised him his liberty in the event of victory, Esca's heart beat fast with joy and hope, and exultation once more.

A thousand vague possibilities danced through his brain; a thousand wild and visionary schemes, of which Mariamne formed the centre figure. Life that had seemed so dull but one short week ago, now shone again in the rosy light with which youth—and youth alone—can tinge the long perspective of the future. Alas for Licinius! he marked the glowing cheek and the kindling eye, with a sensation of despondency weighing at his heart. Nevertheless the lot was cast, the offer was accepted. It was too late for looking back. Nothing remained but to strain every nerve to win.

In all bodily contests, in all mental labours, in everything which human nature attempts, systematic and continuous training is the essential element of success. The palm, as Horace says, can only flourish where the dust is plentiful; and he who would attain a triumph either as an athlete or a scholar, must cultivate his natural abilities with the utmost attention, and the most

rigid self-denial, ere he enters for the prize. It is curious, too, how the mind, like the body, acquires vigour and elasticity by graduated exertion. The task that was an impossibility yesterday, is but a penance to-day, and will become a pleasure to-morrow. Let us follow Esca into the training-school, where his muscles are to be toughened, and his skill perfected for the deadly exercises of the arena.

It is a large square building, something like a modern riding-house, lighted and ventilated at the top, and is laid down three inches deep in sand, an arrangement which increases, indeed, the labour of all pedestrian exertion, but renders a fall comparatively harmless, and accustoms the pupil, moreover, to the yielding surface on which hereafter he will have to struggle for his life. Quoits, dumb-bells, ponderous weights, and massive clubs are scattered in the corners, or propped against the walls of the edifice, and a horizontal leaping-bar, placed at the height of a man's breast, denotes that activity is not neglected in the acquisition of strength. Beside these insignia of peaceful gymnastics, the cestus hangs conspicuous, and racks are placed at intervals supporting the deadly weapons, and defensive armour with which

the gladiator plies his formidable trade. There are also pointless spears, and blunted swords for practice, and a wooden figure hacked and hewed out of all similitude to an enemy, on which the cuts and thrusts most in request have been dealt over and over again with increasing skill and severity.

At one end of the building paces the master to and fro ; now glancing with wary eye at the movements of his pupils ; now pausing to adjust some implement of instruction ; now encouraging or chiding with a gesture ; and anon catching up, as though in sheer absence of mind, one of the idle weapons, and whirling it round his head with a flourish that displays all the power and skill of the practised professional.

Hippias, the retired gladiator, is a man of middle age, and of somewhat lofty stature, rendered more commanding by its lengthy proportions, and the peculiar setting on of the head. Constant exercise, pushed indeed to the verge of toil, and continued for many years, has toughened each shapely limb into the hardness and consistency of wire, and has rendered his large frame lean and sinewy, like a greyhound's. All his gestures have the graceful pliant ease which results from muscu-

lar strength, and his very walk—light, smooth and noiseless—is like that of a panther traversing the floor of its cage. His swarthy complexion has been deeply tanned by exposure to heat and toil, but the blood courses healthfully beneath, and imparts a warm, mellow tint to the skin. The fleshless face, in spite of a worn eager look, and a dash of grey in the hair and beard, is not without a wild defiant beauty of its own; and though its expression is somewhat dissolute and reckless, there is a bold, keen flash in the eye, and the man is obviously enterprising, courageous, and steel to the back-bone.

The Roman ladies, with that depravity of taste which marks a general deterioration of manners and morality, delighted at this period to choose their favourites from the ranks of the amphitheatre. There was a rage for warlike exercises, Amazonian dresses, imitations of the deadly sports, played out with considerable skill and ferocity, nay for the very persons of the gladiators themselves. It was no wonder, then, that the handsome fencing-master, with his reputation for strength and courage, should have been a marked man with the proud capricious matrons of the imperial city. The favour of each, too, was

doubtless his best recommendation to the good graces of the rest; and Hippias might have sunned himself in the smiles of the noblest ladies in Rome.

He made but little account, however, of his good fortune. The peaches fallen on the ground are doubtless the ripest, yet they never seem so tempting as those which sun themselves against the wall, a hand's-breadth above our reach. Nor can a man pay implicit obedience to more than one dominion (at a time); and unless the yoke be *very* heavy, it is scarce worth while to carry it at all. Hippias was neither dazzled nor flattered by the bright eyes that looked so kindly into his war-worn face. He loved a flask of wine nearly as well as a woman's beauty—two foot of pliant steel and a leathern buckler far better than either: nevertheless, amongst all the dainty dames of his acquaintance, he was least disposed to undervalue Valeria's notice, the more so, that she rarely condescended to bestow it on him; and he took more pains with her fencing lessons, than those of any other female pupil, and stayed longer in her house than in that of any lady in Rome. He approved of her strength, her resolution, her quickness, above all her cold manner and her

pride, besides admiring her personal charms exceedingly, in his own practical way. There is a gleam of interest, almost of tenderness in his eyes, as he pauses every now and then in his walk, and reads a line or two from a scroll he carries in his hand, which Myrrhina brought him not an hour ago.

The scroll is from Valeria. She has heard of Esca's peril—nay she has herself brought it on his head; and who knows the price it cost her haughty wilful heart? Yet in all her bitter anger, vexation, shame, she cannot bear to think of the noble Briton down on the sand, writhing and helpless at the mercy of his enemy. It is *the weapon* now she hates, and not *the victim*. It would give her intense pleasure, she feels, to see Placidus humbled, defeated, slain. Such is the sense of justice in a woman's breast—such are the advantages gained by submission at any sacrifice to do their bidding. We need not pity the Tribune, however: in his dealings with either sex, he is well able to take care of himself.

Valeria accordingly sat her down and wrote a few friendly lines to the fencing-master, who had always stood high in her favour, and whose frank bold nature she felt she could trust. Womanlike,

she thought it necessary to fabricate an excuse for her interest in the Briton, by affirming that she had staked heavily on his success in the coming contest. She adjured Hippias to spare no pains in counsel or instruction, and bade him come to see her without delay, and report the progress of his pupil. He raised his eyes from the scroll, and watched the said pupil holding his own gallantly at sword and buckler with Lutorius.

“One, two—Disengage the blade! A feint at the head, a cut at the legs, and come in over the shield with a lunge! Good! but scarce quick enough. Try that again—the elbow turned outwards, the wrist a little higher. So—once more. Now, look at me. Thus.” The combatants paused for breath, Hippias seized a wooden foil, and beckoning to Hirpinus, engaged him in the required position, for Esca’s especial benefit. Trained and wary the old gladiator knew every feint and parry in the game. Yet had those blades been steel, Hirpinus would have been gasping his life out, at the master’s feet, ere the close of their second encounter. Hippias never shifted his ground, never seemed to exert himself much, yet the quickest eye in Rome was puzzled to follow the movements of his point, the

readiest hand to intercept it where it fell. Again he pitted Esca and Lutorius in the mimic strife, and stood with well-pleased countenance to watch the result.

The Briton had, indeed, lost no time in beginning a course of instruction which he hoped was to insure him victory and its reward—his much-desired freedom.

That morning Hirpinus had brought him to the school; and the veteran gladiator watched, with an interest that was almost touching, the preparations which were to fit his young friend for a career, that at best must end ere long in a violent death. Hippias was delighted with the stature and strength of his new pupil. He had matched him at once with Lutorius, a wiry Gaul, who was supposed to be the most scientific swordsman of "*The Family*," and smiled to observe how completely, with an occasional hint from himself, the Briton was a match for his antagonist, who had expected an easy victory, and was even more disgusted than surprised. As the encounter was prolonged, and the combatants, warming to their work, advanced, retreated, struck, lunged, and parried; now traversing warily at full distance—now dashing boldly in to close, the other gladiators gathered

round, excited to unusual interest by the excellence of the play, and the dexterity of the barbarian.

“He is the best we’ve seen here for a lustre at least,” exclaimed Rufus, a gigantic champion from Northern Italy, proud of his stature, proud of his swordsmanship, but above all, proud that he was a Roman citizen, though a gladiator; “those thrusts come home like lightning, and when he misses his parry, see, he jumps away like a wild-cat. Faith, Manlius, if they match him against thee at the games, thou wilt have a handful. I would stake my rights as a Roman citizen on him, toga and all, barbarian though he be. What, man! he would have thee down and disarmed, in a couple of passes!”

Manlius seemed to think so too, though he was loth to confess it. He turned the subject by vowing that Lutorius must be masking his play, and not fighting his best, or he never could be thus worsted by a novice.

“Masking his play!” exclaimed Hirpinus, indignantly, “let him unmask then as soon as he will! I tell thee this lad of mine hath not his match in the empire. I shall see him champion of the amphitheatre, and first swordsman in Rome, ere they give me the wooden foil with the silver

guard,* and lay old Hirpinus on the shelf. I shall be satisfied to retire then, for I shall leave some good manhood to take my place."

"Well crowed!" replied Manlius, not quite pleased at the value placed on his own prowess in comparison. "To hear thee, a man would say there never was but one gladiator in Rome, and that this young mastiff must pull us all down by the throat, because he fences like thyself, wild and wide, and by main strength."

"It is no swordsmanship to run in like a bull and take more than you give," observed Euchenor, listening with his arms folded, and an expression of supreme contempt on his handsome features.

"Nevertheless his blows fall thick and fast, like a hailstorm, and Lutorius shifts his ground every time the young one makes the attack," argued honest Rufus, who had not a grain of either fear or jealousy in his disposition, and who considered his profession as a mere trade by which he could obtain a livelihood for wife and children in the meantime, and a remote chance of independence with a vineyard of his own beyond the Apennines,

* The form by which a gladiator, who had repeatedly distinguished himself, received his dismissal and immunity from the arena for life.

should he escape a violent death in the amphitheatre at last.

“He thrusts too often overhand,” observed Manlius, “and his guard is always open for the wrist.”

“He is a strong fencer, but he has no style,” added Euchenor; and the boxer looked around him with the air of a man who closes a controversy by an unanswerable argument.

Hirpinus was boiling over with indignation; but his eloquence was by no means in proportion to his corporeal gifts, and he could not readily find words to express his dissent and his disdain. Banter, too, and a coarse, good-humoured sort of wrangling was the usual form by which difference of opinion found expression in the training-school. Quarrelling, amongst men whose very trade it was to fight to the death, seemed simply absurd; and to come to blows except in public, and for money, a mere childish waste of time. Indeed, with all their contempt for death, and their extraordinary courage when pitted against each other to amuse the populace, these gladiators, perhaps from the very nature of their profession, seem to have been unsuited for any sustained efforts of energy and endurance. When banded together

under the eagles, they were often so undisciplined in camp, as by no means to be relied on before an enemy. Perhaps there was something of bravado in the flourish with which they entered the Circus, and hailed Cæsar with their greetings from "*those about to die!*"* Moreover, they had to fight in a corner, and with the impossibility of escape. Courage is of many different kinds. Men are brave from various motives—from ambition, from emulation, from the habit of confronting danger; some from a naturally chivalrous disposition, backed by strong physical nerves. The last alone are to be trusted in an emergency; and a really courageous man faces an unexpected and unaccustomed peril, if not with confidence, at least with an unflinching determination to do his best.

Hirpinus turned upon Euchenor, for whom he had no great liking at any time.

"You talk of your science," said he, "and your Greek skill, against which even our Roman thews and sinews are of no avail. Dare you stand up to this barbarian with the *cestus* on? Only to exchange half-a-dozen friendly buffets, you know, in sheer sport."

* The well-known "*Morituri te salutant!*"

But Euchenor excused himself with great disdain. Like many another successful professor, he owed no inconsiderable share of his fame to his own assumption of superiority, and the judgment with which, when practicable, he matched himself against inferior performers. Champions who exist on their reputation, such as it is, are not to peril it lightly against the first tyro that comes, who has everything to gain and nothing to lose by an encounter with the celebrity; whereas the celebrity derives no additional laurels from a triumph, and a defeat tends to take the very bread out of his mouth. Euchenor said as much; but Hirpinus was not satisfied till the subtle Greek, who had learned the terms of the match in which Esca was engaged, observed carelessly, that all the time the Briton had to spare should be devoted to practice in the part he was about to play before the Emperor.

The suggestion took effect upon Hirpinus at once. He sprang across the school to where the master had resumed his walk. The old gladiator positively turned pale while he entreated Hippias to instruct his pupil in all the scientific devices by which those deadly meshes could be foiled.

“Nothing but art can save him,” said he, in

imploring accents, which seemed almost ludicrous from one of his Herculean exterior. "Courage and strength, ay and the activity of a wild-cat, are all paralyzed when once that accursed twine is round your limbs. I know it! I have felt it! I was down under the net myself once. If a man *is* to die, he should die *like* a man, not like a thrush, caught in a springe. He must learn, Hippias, he must practise day by day, and hour by hour: he must study every movement of the caster. Pit him against Manlius, he is the best netsman in 'The Family.' If he learns to foil *him*, he will take the conceit out of Placidus readily enough. I tell you I shall not be easy till I see him with his foot on the gay Tribune's breast!"

"Patience, man," replied Hippias, "thou fearest but one thing in the world, and that is a fathom of twine. Thinkest thou all others are scared at the same bugbear? Mind thine own training; thou art yet too lusty by half to go into the Circus; and leave this young barbarian to me."

The master kept up his influence amongst these lawless pupils, partly by a reserved demeanour and a silent tongue, partly by never suffering his authority to be disputed for a moment. To have said as much as he now did was tantamount to a

confession of interest in the Briton's success ; and Hirpinus resumed his own labours with a lightened heart, whilst Esca, in all the delightful flush of youth and health, and muscular strength developing itself by scientific practice, plied his antagonist with redoubled vigour, and enjoyed his pastime to the utmost.

It was like taking an old friend by the hand, to grasp a sword once more.



CHAPTER XVII.

A VEILED HEART.



FOR three whole days Mariamne had not set eyes on the Briton, so she felt listless and dispirited. Not that she acknowledged, even to herself, the necessity of Esca's presence, nor that she was indeed aware how much it had influenced her thoughts and actions ever since she had known him, a period that seemed now of indefinite length. She found herself perpetually recalling the origin and growth of their acquaintance; she dwelt with a strange pleasure on the gross insult offered her by Spado, which scarce seemed an agreeable subject of contemplation; nor, be sure, did she forget its prompt and satisfactory redress. She remembered every step of her subsequent walk home, and every syllable of their conversation in that hasty and

agitated progress ; nay, every look and gesture of her companion's and of her own. It pleased her to think of the favourable impression made on her father and his brother by their guest ; and the earthen pitcher, from which she gave the latter to drink, assumed a new and unaccountable value in her eyes. Also she strolled to Tiber-side, whenever she had a spare half hour, and sat her down under the shadow of a broken column, with a strange persistency, and a vague expectation of something, she knew not what.

For the first day this dreamy, imaginative existence was delightful. Then came a feeling of want, a consciousness that there was a void, which it would be a great happiness to fill. Soon this grew to a thirst—a craving for a repetition of those hours which had glided by so sweetly and so fast. At rare intervals arose the startling thought, “suppose she should never see him again,” and her heart stopped beating, and her cheek paled with the bare possibility ; yet was there something not wholly painful in a consciousness of the sorrow such a privation would create.

Though young, Mariamne was no foolish and inexperienced girl. Her life had been calculated to elicit and bring to perfection some of woman's

loftiest qualities. She had early learned the nobility of self-sacrifice, the necessity of self-reliance and self-denial. Like the generality of her nation, she possessed considerable pride of race, suppressed indeed and kept down by the exigencies in which the Jews had so often found themselves, but none the weaker nor the less cherished on that account. Notwithstanding his many chastisements and reverses, from his pilgrimage through the wilderness to his different captivities by the great oriental powers, and final subjection under Rome, the Jew never forgot that he sprang from a stem more especially planted by the hand of the Almighty; that he could trace his lineage back, unbroken and unstained, to those who held converse with Moses under the shadow of Mount Sinai, nay, to the Patriarch himself, who had his authority direct from heaven, and who was thought worthy to entertain angels at his tent door on the plains of Mamre. Such a conviction imparted a secret pride to every one of his descendants. Man, woman, and child, were persuaded that to them belonged of right the dominion of the earth.

It may be supposed that one of Eleazar's disposition was not likely to bring up his family in any

humble notions of their privileges and their importance. Mariamne had been early taught to consider her nationality as the first and dearest of her advantages, and womanlike she clung to it all the closer that her people had been forced to submit to the Roman yoke. Habits of patience, of reflection and endurance, had been engendered by the every-day life of the Jewish maiden, witnessing her father's continued impatience of the existing state of things, and his energetic though secret efforts to change the destinies of his countrymen; whilst all that such an education might have created of hard, cunning, and unfeminine in his daughter's mind, the society and counsels of Calchas were eminently qualified to counteract. Losing no opportunity of sowing the good seed, of teaching both by precept and example the lessons he had learned from those who had them direct from the fountain-head, it was impossible to remain long uninfluenced by the constant kindness and gentle bearing of one who understood Christianity to signify, not only faith, and purity, and devotion even to the death, but also that peace and good-will amongst men, which its first teachers inculcated as its fundamental principle and essential element. Calchas indeed lacked not

the fiery energy and the tameless instincts of his race. His nature perhaps was originally fierce and warlike as his brother's, but it had been subdued, softened, exalted by his religion ; and while his heart was pitiful and kindly, nothing remained of the warrior but his loyalty, his courage, and his zeal.

Cherishing a true attachment for that brother, it was doubtless a cause of daily sorrow to observe how totally Eleazar's principles and conduct were opposed to the meek and holy precepts of the new faith. It seemed to human reasoning impossible to convert the Jew from his grand and simple creed, to modify or to explain it, to add to it, or to take away from it, in the slightest degree to alter his belief in that direct thearchy, to which he was bound by the ties of gratitude, of tradition, of national isolation and characteristic pride of race. A religion which accepts the first great principles of truth, the omnipotence and eternity of the Deity, the immortality of souls, and the rewards and punishments of a life to come, stands already upon a solid basis from which it has little inclination to be removed ; and, in all ages, the Jew, as in a somewhat less degree the Mahometan, has been most unwilling to add to his own stern tenets

the mild and loving doctrines of our revealed religion. Eleazar's was a character to which the outward and tangible ceremonials of his worship were essentially acceptable. To him, the law, in its severest and most literal sense, was the only true guide for political measures as for private conduct; and where its burdens were multiplied or its severities enhanced by tradition, he upheld the latter gladly and inflexibly. To offer the sacrifices ordained by Divine command, to exact and rigidly fulfil the minutest points of observance, which the priests enjoined, to keep the Sabbath inviolate by word and deed, also, when opportunity offered, to smite the heathen hip-and-thigh with the edge of the sword; these were the points of faith and practice on which Eleazar took his stand, and from which no consideration of affection, no temptation of ambition, no exigency of the times, would have induced him to waver one hair's-breadth. The fiercest soldier, the wildest barbarian, the most frivolous and dissolute patrician of the Imperial Court, would have been a more promising convert than such a man as this. Yet did not Calchas despair: well he knew that there is a season of seed-time and a season of harvest, that the soil once choked with weeds, or

sown with tares, may thereafter produce a good crop, that waters have been known to flow freely from the bare rock, and that nothing is impossible under heaven. So he loved his brother and prayed for him, and took that brother's daughter to his heart as though she had been his own child.

It must have required no small patience, no small amount of self-control and humility, to engraft in Mariamne the good fruit, which her father held in such hatred and disdain. These, too, were difficulties with which the early Christians had to contend, and of which we now make small account. We read of their privations, their persecutions, their imprisonments, and their martyrdoms, with a thrill of mingled horror and indignation—we pity and admire, we even glorify them as the heroic leaders of that forlorn hope which was destined to head the armies of the only true Conqueror; but we never consider the daily and harassing warfare in which they must have been engaged, the domestic dissensions, the insults of equals, the alienation of friends—above all, the cold looks and estranged affections of those whom they loved best on earth, whom they must give up here, and whom, with the new light that had broken in on them, they could scarce hope to see

hereafter. So-called heroic deeds are not always deserving of that superiority which they claim over mortal weakness, when emblazoned on the glowing page of history. Many a man is capable, so to speak, of winding himself up for one great effort, even though it be to perish on the scaffold or the breach ; but day after day, and year after year to wage unceasing war against our nearest and dearest, our own comforts, our own prosperity, nay, our own weaknesses and inclinations, requires the aid of a sustaining power that is neither without nor within, nor anywhere below on earth, but must reach the suppliant directly and continuously from above.

Nevertheless the example of a true Christian, in the real acceptation of the word, is never without its effect on those who live under its constant influence. Even Eleazar loved and respected his brother more than anything on earth, save his ambition and his creed ; while Mariamne, whose trusting and gentle disposition rendered her a willing recipient of those truths which Calchas lost no opportunity of imparting, gradually, and almost insensibly, imbibed the opinions and the belief of one whose every-day practice was so pure, so elevated, and so kindly,

—to whom moreover she was accustomed to look as her counsellor in difficulty, and her refuge in distress.

It was Calchas, then, whose studies she interrupted as he sat with the scroll before him, that was seldom out of his hand, perusing those Syriac characters again and again, as a mariner consults his chart, never weary of storing information for his future course, and verifying the progress he has already made. It was to Calchas she had determined to apply for comfort because Esca came not, and for assistance to see him again—not that she admitted, even to herself, that this was her intention or her wish. Nevertheless, she hovered about the old man's seat, more caressingly than usual, and finding his attention still riveted on his employment, she laid one hand lightly on his shoulder, and with the other parted the thin grey hair that strayed across his forehead.

He looked up with a pleasant smile. "What is it, little one?" said he, with the endearing diminutive he had used in addressing her from her childhood. "You seem unusually busy with your household affairs to-day. Is this room to be decorated for a guest? My brother makes

no acquaintances here in Rome; and we have given no stranger so much as a mouthful of food since we arrived, save that goodly barbarian you brought home with you the other evening. Is he coming again to-night?"

A bright blush swept over her face, yet when it faded, Calchas could not but remark that she was paler than her wont; and her manner, usually so gentle and composed, was now restless, anxious, and ill-at-ease. "Nay," she replied, "what should I know of the barbarian's movements? It was but a chance meeting that led him to our quiet dwelling in the first instance; and save by the merest accident we are never likely to see him more."

She turned away while she spoke, trying to steady her voice and give it a tone of cold indifference, but failing utterly in the attempt. "There is no such power as chance," said Calchas, looking her keenly in the face.

"I know it," replied Mariamne, smiling sadly. "And I know, too, that whatever befalls us is for the best. Yet some things are hard to bear nevertheless. Not that I have aught to complain of," she added, shrinking instinctively from the very topic she wanted to bring on, "save my

constant anxiety for my father in these tumultuous times."

"He is in God's hand," said Calchas, "who will bring him safe through all his perils, though they seem now to environ him as the breakers boil round a stranded galley, when the wild Adriatic is leaping and dashing for its prey. Take comfort, little one; I cannot bear to see your step so listless and your cheek so pale."

"How can they be otherwise?" returned the girl, not very candidly. "It is a weary lot to be a soldier's daughter. I could even find it in my heart to wish we had never left Judæa—never come to Rome."

He tried his best to soothe and comfort her—his best such as it was, for the good old man knew but little of a woman's heart—its wild hopes, its indefinite aims, its wayward feelings, and its inexplicable tendency to self-torture. He thought in his simplicity the real grievance was that which she avowed, and he strove to remove it in his own kind, hopeful way.

"My child," said he, "the evils that are raging in Italy, the horrors that we hear of every day, cannot but make Eleazar's position more important and less hazardous, as they increase

the difficulties of the imperial councils. It is, indeed, no child's play to bridle such a nation as ours with one hand, and to grasp at the imperial diadem with the other. It takes a bold heart to draw the sword against Judah, and a long arm to buffet Cæsar across the seas. Vespasian will have little leisure to persecute our race; and the Emperor, sore beset as he is, will surely lend a favourable ear to my brother's proposals for peace. Even now the legions are declaring, far and wide, against Vitellius; and civil war, the most dreadful of all scourges is desolating the provinces and entering Italy herself. It was but yesterday that news reached Rome of the revolt of the whole fleet at Ravenna—and ere this Cremona has perhaps fallen into the power of Antonius, that soldier-orator, with the iron arm and the silver tongue. Well we know, for we have been told by One whose words shall never be forgotten, that "a house divided against itself cannot stand;" and is this a time, think you, my child, for the worn-out sensualist who wears the purple here, to make conditions with such a man as your father? It is all in God's hand, as I never cease to insist; yet I cannot but feel that a better day must

at last be dawning upon Judæa, that her enemies will be confounded, her armies victorious, and her chiefs—but what have we to do with the sword?" he broke off abruptly, while his kindling eye and animated gestures bore witness to the ardent spirit that would flash out here and there even now. "Our weapon is the Cross, our warfare is not of this world, our triumph is in our humility, and when most we are brought low, then are we most exalted. Oh, that the time were come, as come it surely will, when Cæsar shall be content to take only that which is Cæsar's, and men shall be gathered under one banner, and in one brotherhood, from all corners of the world!"

It was no exaggerated account Calchas thus gave of the dilemma in which the empire was placed at this juncture. Vespasian, with great political talents, with coolness, patience, and audacity, was playing a game against which the besotted brains of Vitellius were powerless to compete. The former, adored by the army, who saw in him a successful general, an intrepid soldier, and a man of simple, virtuous habits, contrasting nobly with the luxurious gluttony and sensuality of his rival, lost none of his in-

fluence by the moderation he displayed, and the modesty, real or affected, with which he declined the purple. Not afraid to wait till advantage ripened into opportunity, he could seize it when the time came with a bold and tenacious grasp, could turn it deftly to his own profit, and guide those circumstances of which he seemed to be the mere puppet with a master-hand. Though at a distance from the scene of warfare, and to all appearance little more than an unwilling observer of the disturbances carried on in his name, he directed as it were from behind a curtain the operations of his generals; and pulled the strings that set in motion his numerous partizans with a clear head, a delicate touch, and that tenacity of purpose which is the essential element of success. Vitellius, on the other hand, whose natural abilities had been weakened, nay destroyed, by an unceasing course of sensual gratification, wavered in council and hesitated in action—now determined to abdicate the diadem and retire into obscurity—anon persuaded to fight for dominion to the death; and ever paralyzing the energies of his warmest partisans by the distrust he entertained for honest advisers, and

the reliance he placed on the counsels of those traitors who surrounded him.

The empire was perhaps at this period in a more disheartening position than even under the ferocious sway of Nero. Monster as the latter was, he at least held the reins with a firm hand; and tyranny, however oppressive, is doubtless one degree better than anarchy and confusion. Now, the mighty fabric, of which Romulus laid the first stone and Augustus completed the pinnacle—the work of seven centuries, to which every generation had added its labours and its enterprise, till it embraced the confines of the known world—was beginning perceptibly to sink and crumble from its own enormous size and weight. The legions (and it must never be forgotten that the dominion of Rome was essentially that of the sword) were now recruited from natives of her distant colonies. The Syrian and the Ethiop guarded the Eagles as well as the tall turbulent sons of Germany, and the ever-changing ever-faithless Gaul. Armies thus gathered under one standard from such various climates could have but little in common save a certain professional ferocity, and an ardent liking for plunder, no less than pay. Mercenaries

have in all ages been easily bought by the one and seduced by the other. Each legion gradually came to consider itself a separate and independent power, to be sold to the highest bidder. Perhaps the fairest vision of all was a march upon Rome, and a ten hours' sack of the city they were sworn to defend. A great and good man, backed by the glory of name, race, and illustrious actions, could alone have ruled such discordant elements, and united these conflicting interests for the common good; but fate ordained that the weak, worn-out, besotted Vitellius should be seated on the throne of the Cæsars, and that the cool, unflinching, and far-seeing Vespasian should be watching with sleepless eye and ready hand to snatch the diadem from his bewildered predecessor, and place it firmly on his own head.

While the destinies of the world were thus trembling in the balance—while her own nation was fighting for its very existence, and the storm gathering all around, obviously to burst in its greatest fury on the imperial city—the care that weighed heaviest at Mariamne's heart was, that she had that day noticed a barbarian slave walk into the training-school of a Roman gladiator.

“Is it true then,” asked the girl, “that civil

war is indeed raging here, as we have seen it at home? That we shall have an enemy ere long at the very gates of the city?"

"Too true, my child," replied Calchas; "and the Roman people seem, as usual, to make light of the emergency, to eat, drink, buy, sell, and feast their eyes on bloodshed in the Circus, as though their idolatrous temple, where Janus overlooks the usurers and money-changers of the city, were shut up once for all, never to be opened again."

She turned pale, and shuddered at the mention of the Circus.

"Are they making no preparations?" she asked, timidly. "Did I not hear my father say they were collecting the gladiators, and—and—some of the nobles had enrolled their German and British slaves, and were arming them against an attack?"

"It may be so," answered Calchas; "but a slave can scarcely be expected to fight very stoutly for a cause which only serves to rivet his chains. As for the gladiators, those tigers in human form, it were surely better for them to perish in open warfare, than to tear one another to pieces in the arena, like the very beasts against

which I have seen them pitted. Yet these, too, have souls to be saved."

"Surely have they," exclaimed Mariamne, with kindling eyes, "and none to help them, none to show them so much as a glimpse of the true light. These men go out to die as the citizen goes to his business or his bath; and who is answerable to man for their blood? who is answerable to God for their souls?"

His eye brightened while she spoke, and he raised his head like a soldier who hears the trumpet summoning him to the front.

"If I have a well in my court," said he, "and a man fall down and die of thirst at my gate, who is answerable? Surely I am guilty of my brother's blood, that I never so much as reached him the pitcher to drink. Shall these men go down daily to death, and shall I not stretch out a finger lest they perish everlastingly? Mariamne, it seems there is a task set to my hand, and I must accomplish it."

She was far from wishing to hinder him. Actuated as human nature too often is by mixed motives, she could yet respond, in her womanly generosity of heart, to that noble self-sacrifice which was so distinguishing a characteristic of the

new religion, and could appreciate the devotion of Calchas, while she hoped through his intervention to obtain some alleviation of her anxiety on Esca's behalf. She had caught a glimpse of the slave's figure that very day as it entered the portals of the training-school; and this rapid glance had not served to quiet her misgivings on his account.

If Calchas should now think it right to interest himself about a class of men the most reckless and desperate of the whole Roman population, it was probable that he would at the same time learn something of Esca's movements—perhaps be able to dissuade him from joining the fierce band in which she now feared he was about to be enrolled. “It may be that he has some wild hope of thus obtaining his liberty,” thought the girl, and her heart throbbed while she reflected that it was for *her* sake liberty had now become so dear to the barbarian. “It may be that he has extorted some vague promise from his lord, and, in his pride of strength and courage, he never dreams of danger or defeat; but oh! if he should come to harm for my sake, what will become of me? I would rather die a thousand times than that his white skin should be disfigured with a scratch!”

“They are practising for their deadly pastime

in the next street," said she. "I can hear the blows as I go down to draw water. Blows dealt, as it were, in sport; what must they be in earnest?"

"There is no time to be lost," said Calchas. "The games of Ceres are to be soon celebrated, and the Roman crowd will think it but a poor show if some hundreds of gladiators are not slaughtered at the least. Child, I will visit these men to-morrow; they will revile me, but after a time they will listen. If I can even gain over one, be he the lowest and most degraded of the band, it will be a triumph greater than a thousand victories, a gain infinitely more precious than all the treasures of Rome."

"To-morrow may be too late," she returned, moving across the room at the same time so as to hide her face. "The school is full to-day. I—I *think* I saw that barbarian who was here lately go into it an hour or two ago."

"The Briton!" exclaimed Calchas, starting from his seat. "Why did you not tell me so before? Quick, girl, fetch me my gown and sandals. I will go there without delay."

She helped him, nothing loth. In a few minutes Calchas was ready to go forth, and as she watched

him from the door, and saw him turn the corner of the street, Mariamne clasped her hands and muttered a thanksgiving for the success of her well-meant artifice; while the old man strode boldly to his destination, confident in the integrity of his purpose, and rejoicing in the breastplate of proof which covers a good heart bound on a pious mission. "It is no business of mine," was a maxim unknown to the early Christian. Fresh in his memory was the parable of the Good Samaritan; and it never occurred to him that, like the Pharisee, he might "pass by on the other side." The world is some centuries older, yet is that tale of the friendless, wounded wayfarer less suggestive now than it was then?



CHAPTER XVIII.

WINGED WORDS.

THE gladiators were pausing from their toil. Brawny chests heaved and panted, deep voices laughed and swore with returning breath, strong arms looked heavier and stronger as the athlete rested his wide hands upon his hips, and not unconsciously brought his huge muscles into full relief in the attitude. Esca and his late antagonist were wiping the sweat from their brows, and looking at one another with wistful eyes, as if by no means loth to renew the contest, so equally had the last bout been waged.

Hirpinus laid down the weighty clubs he had been wielding, with a grunt of relief. No unpractised arm could have lifted those cumbrous instruments from the ground, yet they were but

as reeds in the hands of the gladiator; nevertheless he lamented piteously the tendency of his mighty frame to increasing bulk, which rendered such heavy and uninteresting work necessary, to fit him for the arena.

“By the body of Hercules!” complained the giant, “I would I were but such a half-starved ape as thou, my Lutorius! See what the master calls training for a man of some solidity; and thank the gods, that an hour’s girls’-play with sword and buckler is enough to keep that slender waist of thine within the compass of a knight’s finger-ring.”

“Girls’-play, call you it?” answered Lutorius. “In faith ’tis a game that would put thy fat carcase on the sand, from sheer want of breath, in a quarter of the time. No more girls’-play for us, my lads, till after the feast of Ceres. The school will be thinner then, or I am mistaken. How many pairs are promised by the Consul for this coming bout? I heard the crier tell us in the street, but I have forgotten.”

“One hundred at least, for sword and buckler alone. And twenty of them out of The Family!” answered Euchenor, readily, and with a malicious smile. His profession as a boxer freed him from

any fatal apprehensions; but he took none the less pleasure in recalling to his comrades the more deadly nature of their encounters. Rufus alone looked grave; perhaps he was thinking of his wife and children while he listened; perhaps that humble cottage in the Apennines seemed further off than ever, and the more desirable on that account. The others smiled grimly, and a wolfish expression gleamed for an instant from their eyes—all but Esca, whose glowing young face displayed only courage, excitement, and hope.

“Bird of ill-omen!” said Hippias, sternly. “What do you know of the clash of steel? Keep to your own boys’-play, and do not meddle with the game that draws blood at every stroke. I think I am master here!”

Euchenor would have answered sullenly, but a knock at the door arrested his attention. As it swung open, to the surprise of all, and of none more than Esca, Calchas stood before them.

“Salve!” said the old man kindly, as he looked around, his venerable head and calm dignified bearing contrasting nobly with the brute strength and coarser faces of the gladiators. “Salve!” he repeated, smiling at the astonishment his appearance seemed to call forth.

Hippias was not lacking in a certain rough courtesy of the camp. He advanced to the newcomer, bade him welcome as a stranger, and inquired the cause of his visit; "for," said he, "judging by your looks, oh, my father! it can scarcely be a mission connected either with me or my disciples here, whose trade, you may observe, is war."

"I too am a soldier," answered Calchas, quietly, looking the astonished fencing-master full in the face. The gladiators had by this time gathered round; like schoolboys at play, they were ripe for mischief. And like schoolboys, it needed but the merest trifle to urge them into any extreme, either of good or evil.

"A soldier!" exclaimed Euchenor, "then you fear not steel!" at the same moment he snatched a short two-edged sword from the wall, and delivered a thrust with it full at the old man's breast. Calchas moved not a muscle; his colour neither rose nor fell; his eye-lash never quivered as he looked steadily at the Greek, who probably only intended a brutal jest, and cared but little how dangerous might be its result. The point had reached the folds of the visitor's gown, when Rufus dashed it aside with his hand, while Hippias

dealt the offender a buffet, which sent him reeling to the opposite wall.

“What now?” exclaimed the Professor, in the tone with which a man rates a disobedient hound. “What now? Am I not master here?”

The others looked on approvingly. The jest was well suited to their habits. They were amused at the discomfiture of the Greek, and pleased with the coolness shown by an old man of such unwarlike exterior. Esca, however, strode up to his friend’s side, and glared about him in a manner that boded no good to the originator of any more such aggressions, either in sport or earnest.

“Thou hast hurt the youth,” remarked Calchas, in as unmoved a tone as would have become the fiercest gladiator of the school. “Thou hast hurt him, and he was but in jest after all. In truth, Hippias, I have not seen so goodly a buffet dealt since I came to Rome. That arm of thine can strike to some purpose, and thy pupils are like their master, brave, and strong, and skilful. I have heard of the legion called ‘Invincible,’ surely I have found it here. My sons, are you not the Invincibles?”

He spoke so quietly they knew not whether he

was jesting with them ; but the flattering title tickled their ears pleasantly enough, and the gladiators crowded round him, with shouts of encouragement and mirth.

“Invincibles!” they laughed. “Invincibles! Well said, old man! yes, we are the Invincibles! Who can stand against ‘The Family?’ Hast come to join us? We shall have plenty of space in the ranks ere another moon be old.”

“Give him a sword, one of you!” exclaimed Rufus; “let us see what he can do against Lutorius. The Gaul has had a bellyful already, press him, old man, and he *must* go down!”

“Nay, let him have a bout with the wooden foils,” laughed Hirpinus. “He is but young and tender. He would sicken at the sight of blood.”

“Or a cast with the net and trident,” continued Manlius.

“Or a round with the cestus,” observed Euchenor; adding with a sneer, “I myself am ready to exchange a buffet or two with him, for sheer good-will.”

“Hold! my new comrades,” interposed Esca, with rising colour. “In my country we are taught to venerate grey hairs. If ye are so keen for cestus, lance, and sword-play, here am I, un-

tried and inexperienced, willing to stand against the best of you, from now till sundown."

The gladiators gathered round the last speaker somewhat angrily: the challenge was indeed a bold one in such company, and a contest begun in play, amongst those turbulent spirits, might end not improbably in too fatal earnest; but Hippias cut the matter short by commanding "silence," in loud imperious tones, and turning to the new-comer, bade him state at once the business that had brought him there and have done with it.

"I came here," said the old man, looking round with a glance of mingled pity and admiration—"I came here to see with my own eyes, the band of Invincibles. I have already told you that I too am a soldier, whose duty it is to go down, if need be, daily unto death."

There was something so quiet and earnest in the speaker's manner, such an absence of self-consciousness or apprehension, a sincerity and goodwill so frank and evident, that the rude fierce men whom he addressed, could not but give him their attention. There was all the interest of novelty in beholding one whose appearance and habits were so at variance with their own, thus throwing himself fearlessly on their forbearance,

and trusting, as it were, to that higher nature, which, dormant though it might be, each man felt to exist within himself.

Even Hippias acknowledged the influence of his visitor's confidence, and answered graciously enough,

"If you are a soldier, I need not tell you that we are but on the drill-ground here. You will see my band to better advantage when they defile by Cæsar at the games of Ceres."

Calchas looked inquiringly round. "And the chorus," said he, "that I have heard ring out in such a warlike tone, as your ranks marched past the Imperial chair: are you perfect in it, my friends? Do you practise the chant as you do your sword-play and your wrestling?"

He had fixed their attention now. Half-interested, half-amused at his strange persistency, they looked laughingly at each other, and their deep voices burst out into the wild and thrilling cadence of their fatal dirge—

"Ave, Cæsar! Morituri te salutant!"

As the last notes died away, silence pervaded the school: to the rudest and most reckless, there was something suggestive in the sounds they knew too well would be the last music they should hear on earth.

Calchas turned suddenly upon Hippias. "And the wages Cæsar gives your men?" said he; "since he buys them, body and bones, they must be very costly. How many thousand sesterces doth he pay for each?"

A brutal laugh echoed round him at the question.

"Sesterces!" answered Hippias. "Nay; Cæsar's generosity provides handsomely for the training and nourishment of his swordsmen."

"True enough!" added Rufus, at which there was another laugh. "He finds us in meat, and drink, and burial!"

"No more?" said Calchas. "Yet I have been told that in Rome everything fetches its price; but little did I think such men as these could be bought for less money than a Syrian dancing-girl, or a senator's white horses. So you are willing to toil day after day, harder than the peasant on the hill-side, or the oarsman in the galley, to live simply, temperately, ay, virtuously, for months together, and then to face certain death, often in its ghastliest form, for the wages a Roman citizen gives his meanest slave—a morsel of meat and a draught of wine! If you conquer in the struggle, a branch of palm may be added to a handful of

silver, and you deem your reward is more than enough. Truly, I am old and feeble, these hands are little worth to strike or parry, yet would I grudge to sell this worn-out body of mine at so mean a price.

“You told us you were a soldier,” observed Rufus, on whom the argument of relative value seemed to make no slight impression.

“So I am,” replied Calchas; “but not at such a low rate of pay as yours. My duties are not heavy. I am not forced to toil all day, nor to watch all night. My head aches with no weighty helmet; breastplate and greaves of steel do not gall my body nor cumber my limbs. I have neither trench to dig, nor mound to raise, nor eagles to guard. I need not stand, like you, against my comrade and my friend, with my point at his throat, and slay the man who has been to me even as a brother, lest he slay me. Yet, though my labours be so easy, and my service be so deficient and inadequate, all the gold and jewels you have seen glistening in a triumph—all the treasures of Cæsar and of Rome—would not equal the reward I hope to earn.”

The gladiators looked from one to the other with glances of astonishment and curiosity. This

was a subject that spoke to their personal interest, and roused their feelings accordingly.

“Are there vacancies in your ranks, comrade?” asked Hirpinus, using the military form of speech habitually affected by his profession. “Will you enrol a man of muscle like myself, who has been looking all his life for a service in which there is little to do and plenty to get? Take my word for it, you will not long want for recruits.”

“There is room for all, and to spare,” answered Calchas, raising his voice till it rung through every corner of the building. “My Captain will enlist you freely, and without reserve. Only you come to him and range yourselves under his banner, and stand by him for a few short watches, a week, a month, a decade or two of years at the most, and he will stand by you when Cæsar and his legions are scattered to the four winds of Heaven; ay, and long after that, for ages and ages rolling on in a circle that has no end! Will you come, brave hearts? I have authority to receive you man by man.”

“Where is your Captain?” asked Hirpinus. “He must needs have a large following. Is he here in Rome? Can we see him ere we take the oaths and raise the standard? Comrades!” he

added, looking round, "this old man speaks as though he were in earnest. Nay, he would scarcely dare to laugh in our very beards!"

"You might have seen him," answered Calchas, "not forty years ago, as I myself did, on the sunny plains of Syria. You will not see him now, till a pinch of dust has been sprinkled on your brow, and the death-penny put into your mouth. Then, when you have crossed the dark river, he will be waiting for you on the other side."

The gladiators looked at one another. "What means he?" said they. "Is he mad?" "Is he an augur?" "Doth he deal in magic?" Rufus reared his tall head above the throng. "Would you have us believe in what we cannot see?" was the apposite question of that practical swordsman.

The old man drew his mantle round his shoulders with the air of one who prepares for argument. All he wanted, was a fair hearing.

"Which is the nobler gift," he asked, "a strong body, or a gallant heart? Ye have fought many times, most of you, in the arena. Answer me truly, which is the conqueror, courage or strength?"

"Courage," they exclaimed, with one voice—all except Euchenor, who muttered something

about skill and good-fortune being preferable to either.

“And yet you cannot see it,” resumed Calchas. “Will you therefore argue that it cannot exist? Is there one of you here that doth not feel a something wanting to complete his daily existence? Why do you long for the smiles of women, and the bubble of the wine-cup? Why can you not rest when the training of to-day is over, for thinking of the labours of to-morrow? Why are you always anxious, always anticipating, always dissatisfied? Because a man consists of two parts, the body and the spirit; because his life is made up of two phases, the present and the future. Your bodies belong to Cæsar, let him have them to do with them what he likes, to-day, to-morrow, at the games of Ceres, at the feast of Neptune, what matter? But the spirit, the man within you, is your own. He it is who doth not wince when the javelin pierces to the quick, or the wild beast rends to the marrow. He it is who quails not when the level sweep of sand seems to rock beneath him, and heave up against his face; when the white garments and eager faces of the crowd spin round him faster and faster as they fade upon his darkening eye. He is the better man of the two, and

he will live for ever. Shall you not provide for *him*? What is your present? Much trouble, many hours of toil. A foot or two of steel in the hand, and a dash at a comrade's throat, then a back-fall below the equestrian benches, and so the future begins. Do you think there is nothing better there, than old Charon's ferry-boat, and the pale, misty banks of the uncertain river? I know the way to a golden land far brighter and fairer than the fabled islands of the West. There is a high wall round it, and the gate is low and narrow; but the key stands in the lock, and you need no death-penny to purchase entrance for the poorest of you. Go to the door in rags, with no other possession but the hope and trust that you may crawl in upon your knees, and it opens ere you have knocked."

Something in each man's heart told him, as he listened, that if he could but believe this, the conviction was worth more than all the treasures of the empire put together. Liable as were these gladiators to stand in the jaws of death at a day's notice, there was something inexpressibly elevating in the idea that the supreme moment which the most careless of them could not but sometimes picture to himself, was the mere passage to a nobler state of existence. The words of a man

who is telling what he, himself, implicitly believes to be the truth, carry with them no small amount of persuasion ; and when Calchas paused, the swordsmen looked doubtingly at him with eyes in which incredulity and admiration were strangely mingled ; not without a certain wistful gleam of hope.

Hippias, indeed, whose tastes inclined him to materialism, and his reflections to utter disbelief in everything save the temper of a blade, seemed disposed to cut the matter short, as being a waste of valuable time ; but the anxiety of his pupils, and especially of Esca, to hear more of the glowing promises held out, induced him to fold his arms and listen, with a smile of conscious superiority, not devoid of contempt.

“And the Captain who leads us ?” asked the Gaul, after a whisper, and a push from Hirpinus. “What of him ? Your promises are fair enough, I grant you, but I would fain know with whom I serve.”

Not one of them but noted the gleam on the old man’s face, as he replied—

“The Captain went up to death with a patient, calm, and kindly face, for you, and you, and you, and me—for those who had never seen him ; for

those who mistrusted him ; for those who failed him, and turned back from him at his need. Nay, for those who tortured and slew him, and whom he forgave with the free full forgiveness of a God ! —ay, of a God ! Which of your gods has done as much for you ? When did one of them leave their Mount Olympus, save for some human need, or some human mission of bloodshed and crime ? Where is the king who would give up an earthly throne, and go voluntarily to a shameful death for the sake of his people ? You are men, my friends,—brave, resolute, hearty men ; what would you have in him whom you serve ?—courage, patience, mercy, good-will to all ? What think ye of him, who left the rulership of the whole universe, and went so willingly to die, that he might buy you to be his own here and hereafter ? Come and range yourselves under his standard. I will tell you of him day by day. There is no jealousy amongst *his* soldiers. The service is easy ; he has told us so himself ; and neither mine nor any mortal tongue can calculate the reward.”

“ Enough of this ! ” interrupted Hippias, noting the eager looks and excited gestures of the swordsmen ; interpreting as he did, the words of Calchas,

in their literal sense, and fearing lest he might, indeed, lose the services of the daring band, on whose blood it was his trade to live—"Enough of this, old man! We have heard you patiently, and now begone! My gladiators have enlisted under Cæsar, and they will not desert their standard for any inducement you can offer. I know not why I have listened to you so long; but trespass not further on my forbearance. This building is no Athenian school of rhetoric; and the only arguments acknowledged by Hippias, are those which may be parried with two foot of steel. Nevertheless, go in peace; old man, and fare you well."

So Calchas went out from amongst these fierce and turbulent spirits, unharmed and well satisfied. He had sown a handful of the good seed, and knew that somewhere it would take root. More than one of the gladiators was already pondering on his words; and the young Briton, with his ardent nature, his kind heart, and his predisposition in favour of Mariamne's kinsman, had resolved that he would hear more of these new doctrines, which seemed to dawn upon him like light from another world.



CHAPTER XIX.

THE ARENA.



HUNDRED thousand tongues, whispering and murmuring with Italian volubility, send up a busy hum like that of an enormous beehive into the sunny air. The Flavian Amphitheatre, Vespasian's gigantic concession to the odious tastes of his people, has not yet been constructed; and Rome must crowd and jostle in the great Circus, if she would behold that slaughter of beasts, and those mortal combats of men, in which she now takes far more delight than in the innocent trials of speed and skill for which the enclosure was originally designed. That her luxurious citizens are dissatisfied even with this roomy edifice, is sufficiently obvious from the many complaints that accompany the struggling and pushing of

those who are anxious to obtain a good place. To-day's bill-of-fare is indeed tempting to the morbid appetites of high and low. A rhinoceros and tiger are to be pitted against each other; and it is hoped that notwithstanding many recent failures in such combats, these two beasts may be savage enough to afford the desired sport. Several pairs of gladiators, at least, are to fight to the death, besides those on whom the populace may show mercy, or from whom they may withhold it at will. In addition to all this, it has been whispered that one well-known patrician intends to exhibit his prowess on the deadly stage. Much curiosity is expressed, and many a wager has been already laid, on his name, his skill, the nature of his conflict, and the chances of his success. Though the Circus be large enough to contain the population of a thriving city, no wonder that it is to-day full to the very brim. As usual in such assemblages, the hours of waiting are lightened by eating and drinking, by jests, practical and otherwise, by remarks, complimentary, sarcastic, or derisive, on the several notabilities who enter at short intervals, and take their places with no small stir and assumption of importance. The nobility and distinguished characters of this disso-

lute age, are better known than respected by their plebeian fellow-citizens.

There is, however, one exception. Though Valeria's Liburnians lay themselves open to no small amount of insolence, by the emphatic manner in which they make way for their mistress, as she proceeds with her usual haughty bearing to her place near the patrician benches—an insolence of which some of the more pointed missiles do not spare the scornful beauty herself—it is no sooner observed that she is accompanied by her kinsman, Licinius, than a change comes over the demeanour even of those who feel themselves most aggrieved, by being elbowed out of their places, and pushed violently against their neighbours, while admiring glances and a respectful silence, denote the esteem in which the Roman general is held by high and low.

It wants a few minutes yet of noon. The southern sun, though his intensity is modified by canvas awnings stretched over the spectators wherever it is possible to afford them shade, lights and warms up every nook and cranny of the amphitheatre ; gleams in the raven hair of the Campanian matron, and the black eyes of the astonished urchin in her arms ; flashes off the golden bosses

that stud the white garments on the equestrian benches, bleaches the level sweep of sand so soon to bear the prints of mortal struggle, and flooding the lofty throne where Cæsar sits in state, deepens the broad crimson hem that skirts his imperial garment, and sheds a death-like hue over the pale, bloated face, which betrays even now no sign of interest, or animation, or delight.

Vitellius attends these brutal exhibitions with the same immobility that characterizes his demeanour in almost all the avocations of life. The same listlessness, the same weary vacancy of expression, pervades his countenance here, as in the senate or the council. His eye never glistens but at the appearance of a favourite dish; and the emperor of the world can only be said to *live* once in the twenty-four hours, when seated at the banquet.

Insensibility seems, however, in all ages to be an affectation of the higher classes; and here, while the plebeians wrangle, and laugh, and chatter, and gesticulate, the patricians are apparently bent on proving that amusement is for them a simple impossibility, and suffering or slaughter matters of the most profound indifference.

And on common occasions who so impassible, so cold, so unmoved by all that takes place around her, as the haughty Valeria? but to-day there is an unusual gleam in the grey eyes, a quiver of the lip, a fixed red spot on either cheek; adding new charms to her beauty, not lost upon the observers who surround her.

Quoth Damasippus to Oarses (for the congenial rogues stand as usual shoulder to shoulder),

“I would not that the patron saw her now. I never knew her look so fair as this. Locusta must have left her the secret of her love-philtres.”

“Oh, Innocent!” replies the other. “Knowest thou not that the patron fights to-day? Seest thou her restless hands, and that fixed smile, like the mask of an old Greek player? She loves him; trust me, therefore, she has lost her power, were she subtle as Arachne. Dost not know the patron? To do him justice he never prizes the stakes when he has won the game.”

And the two fall to discussing the dinner they have brought with them, and think they are perfectly familiar with the intricacies of a woman's feelings.

Meantime Valeria seems to cling to Licinius as

though there were some spell in her kinsman's presence to calm that beating heart of which she is but now beginning to learn the wayward and indomitable nature.

For the twentieth time she asks,—“Is he prepared at all points? Does he know every feint of the deadly game? Are his health and strength as perfect as training can make them? And oh, my kinsman! is he confident in himself? Does he feel *sure* that he will win?”

To which questions Licinius, though wondering at the interest she betrays in such a matter, answers as before,—

“All that skill, and science, and Hippias can do, has been done. He has the advantage in strength, speed, and height. Above all, he has the courage of his nation. As they get fiercer they get cooler, and they are never so formidable as when you deem them vanquished. I could not sit here if I thought he would be worsted.”

Then Valeria took comfort for a while, but soon she moved restlessly on her cushions. “How I wish they would begin!” said she; yet every moment of delay seemed at the same time to be a respite of priceless value, even while it added to the torture of suspense.

Many hearts were beating in that crowd with love, hope, fear, and anxiety ; but perhaps none so wildly as those of two women, separated but by a few paces, and whose eyes some indefinable attraction seemed to draw irresistibly towards each other.

While Valeria, in common with many ladies of distinction, had encroached upon the space originally allotted to the vestal virgins, and established by constant attendance in the amphitheatre a prescriptive right to a cushioned seat for herself and her friends, women of lower rank were compelled to station themselves in an upper gallery allotted to them, or to mingle on sufferance with the crowd in the lower tier of places, where the presence of a male companion was indispensable for protection from annoyance, and even insult. Nevertheless, within speaking distance of the haughty Roman lady stood Mariamne, accompanied by Calchas, trembling with fear and excitement in every limb, yet turning her large dark eyes upon Valeria, with an expression of curiosity and interest that could only have been aroused by an instinctive consciousness of feelings common to both. The latter, too, seemed fascinated by the gaze of the Jewish maiden, now

bending on her a haughty and inquiring glance, anon turning away with a gesture of affected disdain ; but never unobservant, for many seconds together, of the dark, pale beauty and her venerable companion.

When she was at last fairly wedged in amongst the crowd, Mariamne could hardly explain to herself how she came there. It had been with great difficulty that she persuaded Calchas to accompany her ; and, indeed, nothing but his interest in Esca, and the hope that he might, even here, find some means of doing good, would have tempted the old man into such a scene. It was with many a burning blush and painful thrill that she confessed to herself, she must go mad with anxiety were she absent from the death-struggle to be waged by the man whom she now knew she loved so dearly ; and it was with a wild defiant recklessness that she resolved if aught of evil should befall him to give herself up thenceforth to despair. She felt as if she was in a dream ; the sea of faces, the jabber of tongues, the strange novelty of the spectacle, confused and wearied her ; yet through it all Valeria's eye seemed to look down on her with an ominous boding of ill : and when, with an effort, she forced

her senses back into self-consciousness, she felt so lonely, so frightened, and so unhappy, that she wished she had never come.

And now, with peal of trumpets and clash of cymbals, a burst of wild martial music rises above the hum and murmur of the seething crowd. Under a spacious archway, supported by marble pillars, wide folding doors are flung open, and two by two, with stately step and slow, march in the gladiators, armed with the different weapons of their deadly trade. Four hundred men are they, in all the pride of perfect strength and symmetry, and high training, and practised skill. With head erect and haughty bearing, they defile once round the arena, as though to give the spectators an opportunity of closely scanning their appearance, and halt with military precision to range themselves in line under Cæsar's throne. For a moment there is a pause and hush of expectation over the multitude, while the devoted champions stand motionless as statues in the full glow of noon: then bursting suddenly into action, they brandish their gleaming weapons over their heads, and higher, fuller, fiercer, rises the terrible chant that seems to combine the shout of triumph with the wail of suffering, and to bid

a long and hopeless farewell to upper earth, even in the very recklessness and defiance of its despair—

“Ave, Cæsar! Morituri te salutant!”

Then they wheel out once more, and range themselves on either side of the arena; all but a chosen band who occupy the central place of honour, and of whom every second man at least is doomed to die.

These are the picked pupils of Hippias; the quickest eyes and the readiest hands in “The Family;” therefore it is that they have been selected to fight by pairs to the death, and that it is understood no clemency will be extended to them from the populace.

With quickened breath, and eager looks, Valeria and Mariamne scan their ranks in search of a well-known figure: both feel it to be a questionable relief that he is not there; but the Roman lady tears the edge of her mantle to the seam, and the Jewish girl offers an incoherent prayer in her heart, for she knows not what.

Esca’s part is not yet to be performed, and he is still in the back-ground, preparing himself carefully for the struggle.

The rest of “The Family,” however, muster in

force. Tall Rufus stalks to his appointed station with a calm business-like air that bodes no good to his adversary, whoever he may be. He has fought too often not to feel confident in his own invincible prowess; and when compelled to despatch a fallen foe, he will do it with sincere regret, but none the less dexterously and effectually for that. Hirpinus, too, assumes his usual air of joyal hilarity. There is a smile on his broad, good-humoured face; and though, notwithstanding the severity of his preparation, his huge muscles are still a trifle too full and lusty, he will be a formidable antagonist for any fighter whose proportions are less than those of a Hercules. As the crowd pass the different combatants in review, none, with the exception perhaps of Rufus, have more backers than their old favourite. Lutorius too, notwithstanding his Gallic origin, which places him but one remove, as it were, from a barbarian, finds no slight favour with those who pride themselves on their experience in such matters. His great activity and endurance, combined with thorough knowledge of his weapon, have made him the victor in many a public contest. As Damasippus observes to his friend: "Lutorius can always tire out an adversary and

despatch him at leisure ;” to which Oarses replies, “ If he be pitted to-day against Manlius, I will wager thee a thousand sesterces blood is not drawn in the first three assaults.”

The pairs had already been decided by lot ; but amongst the score of combatants who were to fight to the death, these formidable champions were the most celebrated, and as such the especial favourites of the populace. Certain individuals in the crowd, who were sufficiently familiar with the gladiators to exchange a word of greeting, and to call them by their names, derived in consequence, no small increase of importance amongst the bystanders.

The swordsmen, although now ranged in order round the arena, are destined, for a time, at least, to remain inactive. The sports are to commence with a combat between a lately imported rhinoceros, and a Libyan tiger, already familiarly known to the public, as having destroyed two or three Christian victims and a negro slave. It is only in the event of these animals being unwilling to fight, or becoming dangerous to the spectators, that Hippias will call in the assistance of his pupils for their destruction. In the mean time, they have an excellent view of the conflict, though perhaps it might

be seen in greater comfort from the farther and safer side of the barrier.

Vitellius, with a feeble inclination of his head, signs to begin, and a portable wooden building which has been wheeled into the lists, creating no little curiosity, is now taken to pieces by a few strokes of the hammer. As the slaves carry away the dismembered boards, with the rapidity of men in terror of their lives, a huge, unwieldy beast stands disclosed, and the rhinoceros of which they have been talking for the last week, bursts on the delighted eyes of the Roman public. These are perhaps a little disappointed at first, for the animal seems peaceably, not to say indolently, disposed. Taking no notice of the shouts which greet his appearance, he digs his horned muzzle into the sand in search of food, as though secure in the overlapping plates of armour, that sway loosely on his enormous body, with every movement of his huge ungainly limbs. So intent are the spectators on this rare monster, that their attention is only directed to the farther end of the arena, by the restlessness which the rhinoceros at length exhibits. He stamps angrily with his broad flat feet, his short pointed tail is furiously agitated, and the gladiators who are near him,

observe that his little eye is glowing like a coal. A long, low, dark object, lies coiled up under the barrier as though seeking shelter, nor is it till the second glance, that Valeria, whose interest, in common with that of the multitude, is fearfully excited, can make out the fawning, cruel head, the glaring eyes, and the striped sinewy form of the Libyan tiger.

In vain the people wait for him to commence the attack. Although he is sufficiently hungry, having been kept for more than a day without food, it is not his nature to carry on an open warfare. Damasippus and Oarses jeer him loudly as he skulks under the barrier; and Calchas cannot forbear whispering to Mariamne, that “a curse has been on the monster since he tore the brethren limb from limb, in that very place, for the glory of the true faith.”

The rhinoceros, however, seems disposed to take the initiative: with a short labouring trot he moves across the arena, leaving such deep footprints behind him, as sufficiently attest his enormous bulk and weight. There is a flash like real fire from the tiger's eyes, hitherto only sullen and watchful—his waving tale describes a semicircle in the sand—and he coils himself more closely to-

gether, with a deep low growl: even now he is not disposed to fight save at an advantage.

A hundred thousand pairs of eyes, straining eagerly on the combatants, could scarce detect the exact moment at which that spring was made. All they can now discern is the broad mailed back of the rhinoceros swaying to and fro, as he kneels upon his enemy; and the grating of the tiger's claws against the huge beast's impenetrable armour, can be heard in the farthest corner of the gallery that surrounds the amphitheatre.

The leap was made as the rhinoceros turned his side for an instant towards his adversary; but with a quickness marvellous in a beast of such prodigious size, he moved his head round in time to receive it on the massive horn that armed his nose, driving the blunt instrument, from sheer muscular strength, right through the body of the tiger, and finishing his work by falling on him with his knees, and pressing his life out under that enormous weight.

Then he rose unhurt, and blew the sand out of his nostrils, and left, as it seemed, unwillingly, the flattened, crushed, and mangled carcase, turning back to it once and again, with a horrible, yet ludicrous pertinacity, ere he suffered the Ethiop-

ians who attended him to lure him out of the amphitheatre with a bundle or two of green vegetable food.

The people shouted and applauded loudly. Blood had been drawn, and their appetite was sharpened for slaughter. It was with open, undisguised satisfaction that they counted the pairs of gladiators, and looked forward to the next act of the entertainment.

Again the trumpets sound, and the swordsmen range themselves in opposite bodies, all armed alike with a deep concave buckler, and a short, stabbing, two-edged blade ; but distinguished by the colour of their scarfs. Wagers are rapidly made on the green and the red : so skilfully has the experienced Hippias selected and matched the combatants, that the oldest patrons of the sport confess themselves at a loss which to choose.

The bands advance against each other, three deep, in imitation of the real soldiers of the empire. At the first crash of collision, when steel begins to clink, as thrust and blow and parry are exchanged by these practised warriors, the approbation of the spectators rises to enthusiasm ; but men's voices are hushed, and they hold their breath when the strife begins to waver to and fro, and the ranks open out

and disengage themselves, and blood is to be seen in patches on those athletic frames, and a few are already down, lying motionless where they fell.

The green is giving way, but their third rank has been economized, and its combatants are as yet fresh and untouched; these now advance to fill the gaps made among their comrades, and the fortunes of the day seem equalized once more.

And now the arena becomes a ghastly and forbidding sight. They die hard, these men, whose very trade is slaughter; but mortal agony cannot always suppress a groan, and it is pitiful to see some prostrate giant, supporting himself painfully on his hands, with drooping head and fast closing eye fixed on the ground, while the life-stream is pouring from his chest into the thirsty sand.

It is real sad earnest, this representation of war, and resembles the battle-field in all save that no prisoners are taken and quarter is but rarely given. Occasionally, indeed, some vanquished champion, of more than common beauty, or who has displayed more than common address and courage, so wins on the favour of the spectators, that they sign for his life to be spared. Hands are turned outwards, with the thumb pointing to the earth, and the victor sheathes his sword, and

retires with his worsted antagonist, from the contest; but more generally the fallen man's signal for mercy is neglected: ere the shout "A hit!" has died upon his ears, his despairing eye marks the thumbs of his judges, pointing upwards, and he disposes himself to "welcome the steel," with a calm courage, worthy of a better cause.

The reserve, consisting of ten pairs of picked gladiators, has not yet been engaged. The green and the red have fought with nearly equal success; but when the trumpet has sounded a halt, and the dead have been dragged away by grappling-hooks, leaving long tracks of crimson in their wake, a careful enumeration of the survivors gives the victory by one, to the latter colour. Hippias, coming forward in a suit of burnished armour, declares as much, and is greeted with a round of applause. In all her preoccupation, Valeria cannot refrain from a glance of approval at the handsome fencing-master; and Mariamne, who feels that Esca's life hangs on the man's skill and honesty, gazes at him with mingled awe and horror, as on some being of another world.

But the populace have little inclination to waste the precious moments in cheering Hippias, or in calculating loss and gain. Fresh wagers are

indeed made on the matches about to take place ; but the prevailing feeling over that numerous assemblage, is one of morbid excitement and anticipation. The ten pairs of men now marching so proudly into the centre of the lists, are pledged to fight to the death.

It would be a disgusting task to detail the scene of bloodshed, to dwell on the fierce courage wasted, and the brutal, useless slaughter perpetrated in those Roman shambles : yet, sickening as was the sight, so inured were the people to such exhibitions, so completely imbued with a taste for the horrible, and so careless of human life, that scarcely an eye was turned away, scarcely a cheek grew paler, when a disabling gash was received, or a mortal blow driven home ; and mothers with babies in their arms would bid the child turn its head to watch the death-pang on the pale stern face of some prostrate gladiator.

Licinius had looked upon carnage in many forms, yet, a sad, grave disapproval sat on the general's noble features. Once after a glance at his kinswoman's eager face, he turned from her with a gesture of anger and disgust ; but Valeria was too intent upon the scene enacted within a few short paces to spare attention for anything besides,

except, perhaps, the vague foreboding of evil that was gnawing at her heart, and to which such a moment of suspense as the present afforded a temporary relief.

Rufus and Manlius had been pitted against each other by lot. The taller frame and greater strength of the former were supposed to be balanced by the latter's exquisite skill. Collars and bracelets were freely offered at even value amongst the senators and equestrians on each. While the other pairs were waging their strife with varying success in different parts of the amphitheatre, these had found themselves struggling near the barrier close under the seat occupied by Valeria. She could hear distinctly their hard-drawn breath, could read on each man's face the stern, set expression of one who has no hope save in victory, for whom defeat is inevitable and instant death. No wonder she sat, so still and spell-bound, with her pale lips parted and her cold hands clenched.

The blood was pouring from more than one gash on the giant's naked body, yet Rufus seemed to have lost neither coolness nor strength. He continued to ply his adversary with blow on blow, pressing him, and following him up, till he drove

him nearly against the barrier. It was obvious that Manlius, though still unwounded, was over-matched and overpowered. At length Valeria drew in her breath with a gasp, as if in pain. It seemed as if she, the spectator, winced from that fatal thrust, which was accepted so calmly by the gladiator whom it pierced. Rufus could scarcely believe he had succeeded in foiling his adversary's defence, and driving it deftly home, so unmoved was the familiar face looking over its shield into his own—so steady and skilful was the return which instantaneously succeeded his attack. But that face was growing paler and paler with every pulsation. Valeria, gazing with wild fixed eyes, saw it wreathed in a strange sad smile, and Manlius reeled and fell where he stood, breaking his sword as he went down, and burying it beneath his body in the sand.

The other strode over him in act to strike. A natural impulse of habit or self-preservation bade the fallen man half raise his arm, with the gesture by which a gladiator was accustomed to implore the clemency of the populace, but he recollected himself, and let it drop proudly by his side. Then he looked kindly up in his victor's face, "Through the heart, comrade," said he,

quietly, "for old friendship's sake!" and he never winced nor quailed when the giant drove the blow home with all the strength that he could muster. They had fed at the same board, and drank from the same wine-cup for years; and this was all he had it in his power to bestow upon his friend.

The people applauded loudly, but Valeria, who had heard the dead man's last appeal, felt her eyes fill with tears; and Mariamne, who had raised her head to look at this unlucky moment, buried it once more in her kinsman's cloak, sick and trembling, ready to faint with pity, and dismay, and fear.



CHAPTER XX.

THE TRIDENT AND THE NET.

BUT a shout was ringing through the amphitheatre that roused the Jewish maiden effectually to the business of the day. It had begun in some far-off corner with a mere whispered muttering, and had been taken up by spectator after spectator, till it swelled into a wild and deafening roar. "A Patrician! a Patrician!" vociferated the crowd, thirsting fiercely for fresh excitement, and palled with vulgar carnage, yearning to see the red blood flow from some scion of an illustrious house. The tumult soon reached such a height as to compel the attention of Vitellius, who summoned Hippias to his chair, and whispered a few sentences in his ear. This somewhat calmed the excitement; and while the fencing-master's

exertions cleared the arena of the dead and wounded, with whom it was cumbered, a general stir might have been observed throughout the assemblage, while each individual changed his position, and disposed himself more comfortably for sight-seeing, as is the custom of a crowd, when anything of especial interest is about to take place. Ere long Damasippus and Oarses were observed to applaud loudly; and their example being followed by thousands of imitators, the clapping of hands, the stamping of feet, the cheers, and other vociferations rose with redoubled vigour, while Julius Placidus stepped gracefully into the centre of the arena, and made his obeisance to the crowd with his usual easy and somewhat insolent bearing.

The Tribune's appearance was well calculated to excite the admiration of the spectators, no mean judges of the human form, accustomed as they were to scan and criticise it in its highest state of perfection. His graceful figure was naked and unarmed, save for a white linen tunic, reaching to the knee, and although he wore rings of gold round his ankles, his feet were bare to insure the necessary speed and activity demanded by his mode of attack. His long dark locks,

carefully curled and perfumed for the occasion, and bound by a single golden fillet, floated carelessly over his neck, while his left shoulder was tastefully draped, as it were, by the folds of the dangling net, sprinkled and weighted with small leaden beads, and so disposed as to be whirled away at once without entanglement or delay upon its deadly errand. His right hand grasped the trident, a three-pronged lance, some seven feet in length, capable of inflicting a fatal wound, and the flourish with which he made it quiver round his head displayed a practised arm and a perfect knowledge of the offensive weapon.

To the shouts which greeted him, "Placidus! Placidus!" "Hail to the Tribune!" "Well done the Patrician Order!" and other such demonstrations of welcome, he replied by bowing repeatedly, especially directing his courtesies to that portion of the amphitheatre in which Valeria was placed. With all his acuteness little did the Tribune guess how hateful he was at this moment to the very woman on whose behalf he was pledged to engage in mortal strife—little did he dream how earnest were her vows for his speedy humiliation and defeat. Valeria, sitting there with the red spots burning a deeper crimson

in her cheeks, and her noble features set in a mask of stone, would have asked nothing better than to have leapt down from her seat, snatched up sword and buckler, of which she well knew the use, and done battle with him, then and there to the death.

The Tribune now walked proudly round the arena, nodding familiarly to his friends, a proceeding which called forth raptures of applause from Damasippus, Oarses, and other of his clients and freedmen. He halted under the chair of Cæsar, and saluted the Emperor with marked deference; then, taking up a conspicuous position in the centre, and leaning on his trident, seemed to await the arrival of his antagonist.

He was not kept long in suspense. With his eyes riveted on Valeria, he observed the fixed colour of her cheeks gradually suffusing face, neck, and bosom, to leave her as pale as marble when it faded, and turning round he beheld his enemy, marshalled into the lists by Hippias and Hirpinus—the latter, who had slain his man, thus finding himself at liberty to afford counsel and countenance to his young friend. The shouts which greeted the new-comer were neither so long nor so lasting as those that did honour to the

Tribune; nevertheless if the interest excited by each were to be calculated by intensity rather than amount, the slave's suffrages would have far exceeded those of his adversary.

Mariamne's whole heart was in her eyes as she welcomed the glance of recognition he directed exclusively to *her*; and Valeria turning from one to the other felt a bitter pang shoot to her very marrow, as she instinctively acknowledged the existence of a rival.

Even at that moment of hideous suspense, a host of maddening feelings rushed through the Roman lady's brain. Many a sun-burnt peasant-woman, jostled and bewildered in the crowd, envied that sumptuous dame with her place apart, her stately beauty, her rich apparel, and her blazing jewels; but the peasant-woman would have rued the exchange had she been forced to take, with these advantages, the passions that were laying waste Valeria's heart. Wounded pride, slighted love, doubt, fear, vacillation and remorse, are none the more endurable for being clothed in costly raiment, and trapped out with gems and gold.

While Mariamne, in her singleness of heart, had but one great and deadly fear—that he should

fail—Valeria found room for a thousand anxieties and misgivings, of conflicting tendencies, and chafed under a distressing consciousness that she could not satisfy herself, what it was she most dreaded or desired.

Unprejudiced and uninterested spectators, however, had but one opinion as to the chances of the Briton's success. If anything could have added to the enthusiasm called forth by the appearance of Placidus, it was the patrician's selection of so formidable an antagonist. Esca, making his obeisance to Cæsar, in the pride of his powerful form, and the bloom of his youth and beauty, armed, moreover, with helmet, shield, and sword, which he carried with the ease of one habituated to their use, appeared as invincible a champion as could have been chosen from the whole Roman empire.

Even Hirpinus, albeit a man experienced in the uncertainties of such contests, and cautious, if not in giving, at least in backing, his opinion, whispered to Hippias, that the Patrician looked like a mere child by the side of their pupil, and offered to wager a flagon of the best Falernian “that he was carried out of the arena feet foremost within five minutes after the first attack if he

missed his throw!" To which the fencing-master, true to his habits of reticence and assumed superiority, vouchsafed no reply save a contemptuous smile.

The adversaries took up their ground with exceeding caution. No advantage of sun or wind was allowed to either, and having been placed by Hippias at a distance of ten yards apart in the middle of the arena, neither moved a limb for several seconds, as they stood intently watching each other, themselves the centre on which all eyes were fixed. It was remarked that while Esca's open brow bore only a look of calm resolute attention, there was an evil smile of malice stamped, as it were, upon the Tribune's face—the one seemed an apt representation of Courage and Strength—the other of Hatred and Skill.

"He carries the front of a conqueror," whispered Licinius to his kinswoman, regarding his slave with looks of anxious approval. "Trust me, Valeria, we shall win the day. Esca will gain his freedom; the gilded chariot and the white horses shall bring him and me to your door to-morrow morning, and that gaudy Tribune will have had a lesson, that I for one shall not be sorry to have been the means of bestowing on him."

A bright smile lighted up Valeria's face, but she looked from the speaker to a dark-haired girl in the crowd below, and the expression of her countenance changed till it grew as forbidding as the Tribune's, while she replied with a careless laugh—

“I care not who wins now, Licinius, since they are both in the lists. To tell the truth, I did but fear the courage of this Titan of yours might fail him at the last moment, and the match would not be fought out after all. Hippias tells me the Tribune is the best netsman he ever trained.”

He looked at her with a vague surprise; but following the direction of his kinswoman's eyes, he could not but remark the obvious distress and agitation of the cloaked figure on which they were bent.

Mariamne, when she saw the Briton fairly placed, front to front with his adversary, had neither strength nor courage for more. Leaning against Calchas the poor girl hid her face in her hands and wept as if her heart would break. Myrrhina, who, no more than her mistress, could have borne to be absent from such a spectacle, had forced her way into the crowd, accompanied by a few of Valeria's favourite slaves.

Standing within three paces of the Jewess, that voluble damsel expatiated loudly on the appearance of the combatants, and her careless jests and sarcasms cut Mariamne to the quick. It was painful to hear her lover's personal qualities canvassed as though he were some handsome beast of prey, and his chance of life and death balanced with heartless nicety by the flippant tongue of a waiting maid ; but there was yet a deeper sting in store for her even than this. Myrrhina having got an audience was nothing loth to profit by their attention. "I'm sure," said she, "whichever way the match goes I don't know what my mistress will do. As for the Tribune he would get out of his chariot any day on the bare stones to kiss the very ground she walks on, and yet if he dare so much as to leave a scratch upon that handsome youth's skin, he need never come to our doors again. Why time after time have I hunted that boy all over the city to bring him home with me. And it's no light matter for a slave and a barbarian to have won the favour of the proudest lady in Rome. See how he looks up at her now, before they begin !"

The light words wounded very sore ; and Mariamne raised her head for one glance at the

Briton, half in fond appeal, half to protest, as it were, against the slander she had heard.

What she saw, however, left no room in her loving heart, for any feeling save intense horror and suspense.

With his eye fixed on his adversary, Esca was advancing, inch by inch, like a tiger about to spring. Covering the lower part of his face, and most of his body, with his buckler, and holding his short two-edged sword with bended arm, and threatening point, he crouched to at least a foot lower than his natural stature, and seemed to have every muscle and sinew braced, to dash in like lightning when the opportunity offered. A false movement, he well knew, would be fatal, and the difficulty was to come to close quarters, as, directly he was within a certain distance, the deadly cast was sure to be made. Placidus, on the other hand, stood perfectly motionless. His eye was unusually accurate, and he could trust his practised arm to whirl the net abroad at the exact moment when its sweep would be irresistible. So he remained in the same collected attitude, his trident shifted into the left hand, his right foot advanced, his right arm wrapped in the gathered folds of the net which hung across his

body and covered the whole of his left side and shoulder. Once he tried a scornful gibe and smile to draw his enemy from his guard, but in vain; and though Esca in return made a feint with the same object, the former's attitude remained immovable, and the latter's snake-like advance continued with increasing caution and vigilance.

An inch beyond the fatal distance, Esca halted once more. For several seconds the combatants thus stood at bay, and the hundred thousand spectators crowded into that spacious amphitheatre, held their breath and watched them like one man.

At length the Briton made a false attack, prepared to spring back immediately and foil the netsman's throw, but the wily Tribune was not to be deceived, and the only result was that without appearing to shift his ground, he moved an arm's length nearer his adversary. Then the Briton dashed in, and this time in fierce earnest. Foot, hand, and eye, all together, and so rapidly that the Tribune's throw flew harmless over his assailant's head, Placidus only avoiding his deadly thrust by the cat-like activity with which he leaped aside; then turning round, he scoured

across the arena for life, gathering his net for a fresh cast as he flew. "Coward!" hissed Valeria, between her set teeth, while Mariamne breathed once more—nay, her bosom panted, and her eye sparkled with something like triumph at the approaching climax.

She was premature, however, in her satisfaction, and Valeria's disdain was also undeserved. Though apparently flying for his life, Placidus was as cool and brave at that moment, as when he entered the arena. Ear and eye were alike on the watch for the slightest false movement on the part of his pursuer; and ere he had half crossed the lists, his net was gathered up, and folded with deadly precision, once more.

The Tribune especially prided himself on his speed of foot. It was on this quality that he chiefly depended for safety in a contest which at first sight appeared so unequal. He argued from the great strength of his adversary, that the latter would not be so pre-eminent in activity as himself; but he omitted to calculate the effects of a youth spent in the daily labours of the chase amongst the woods and mountains of Britain. Those following feet had many a time run down the wild-goat over its native rocks.

Faster and faster fly the combatants, to the intense delight of the crowd, who specially affect this kind of combat for the pastime it thus affords. Speedy as is the Tribune, his foe draws nearer and nearer, and now close to where Mariamne stands with Calchas, he is within a stride of his antagonist. His arm is up to strike! when a woman's shriek rings through the amphitheatre, startling Vitellius on his throne, and the sword flies aimlessly from the Briton's grasp as he falls forward on his face, and the impetus rolls him over and over in the sand.

There is no chance for him now. He is scarcely down ere the net whirls round him, and he is fatally and helplessly entangled in its folds. Mariamne gazes stupefied on the prostrate form, with stony face and a fixed unmeaning stare. Valeria springs to her feet in a sudden impulse, forgetting for the moment where she is.

Placidus striding over his fallen enemy, with his trident raised, and the old sneering smile deepening and hardening on his face, observed the cause of his downfall, and inwardly congratulated himself on the lucky chance which had alone prevented their positions being reversed.

The blood was streaming from a wound in Esca's foot. It will be remembered that where Manlius fell, his sword was buried under him in the sand. On removing his dead body the weapon escaped observation, and the Briton treading in hot haste on the very spot where it lay concealed, had not only been severely lacerated, but tripped up and brought to the ground by the snare.

All this flashed through the conqueror's mind, as he stood erect, prepared to deal a blow that should close all accounts, and looked up to Valeria for the fatal sign.

Maddened with rage and jealousy, sick, bewildered, and scarcely conscious of her actions, the Roman lady was about to give it, when Licinius seized her arms and held them down by force. Then with a numerous party of friends and clients, he made a strong demonstration in favour of mercy. The speed of foot too, displayed by the vanquished, and the obvious cause of his discomfiture, acted favourably on the majority of spectators. Such an array of hands turned outwards and pointing to the earth met the Tribune's eye, that he could not forbear his cruel purpose, so he gave his weapon to one of the attendants who had now entered the arena,

took his cloak from the hands of another, and with a graceful bow to the spectators turned scornfully away from his fallen foe.

Esca, expecting nothing less than immediate death, had his eyes fixed on the drooping figure of Mariamne; but the poor girl had seen nothing since his fall. Her last moment of consciousness showed her a cloud of dust, a confused mass of twine, and an ominous figure with arm raised in act to strike; then barriers and arena, and eager faces and white garments, and the whole amphitheatre, pillars, sand, and sky, reeled ere they faded into darkness; sense and sight failed her at the same moment, and she fainted helplessly in her kinsman's arms.

END OF VOLUME I.

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